Aleph

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by cognomen

Summary

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The box is nearly that old. He has considered turning it down on its side to form a table.

Will isn't certain that would be reverent. He doesn't think about it.

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In which Hannibal is (was) an Android, and Will a robotic technician. The tragedy in their past and his attempts to save Hannibal's first incarnation come back to haunt Will. Aleph, in this case, refers to a point in space that contains all other points, as related to the concept of Omega Point. A sequel to Omega Point, so it is helpful to read that fic first. It's possible to dive right into this one, however!

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

It's four feet tall, heavy and bulky and in the way. It stands unopened, a relic that becomes at times a catch for his cups of coffee as he comes in the door to greet Winston. The dog is well past four now, yet still enthusiastic enough that Will needed empty hands when Winston welcomed him home.

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Today, when he comes up the stairs weighed down with sixty pounds of dog food and unlocks the door, he finds his Glass ringing shrill and insistent where he had left it on the counter, as he often did when he wanted a little privacy.

He drops the bag heavily onto the top of the box, and runs his hand over the soft crown of Winston's head as the dog approaches, curious nose angling up toward the bag that's just out of his reach.

Will grabs for the phone.

"Mr. Graham?" the voice is Chilton's. It has become familiar and Will has learned the tone and cadence of it - at least in this.

"Good morning," Will answer, out of breath. He's not sure that it's still morning, but the politeness isn't what's really required of him. Just the sound of his voice, the knowledge that he was there.

"Can you upgrade the processor?" the question is in earnest, delivered through Will's Glass to his ear.

The tone is familiar.

Chilton has become his best customer - a better client than even the Crawfords. He is trying to build the statue of David from mud, and using Will's hands to do it.

"Mr. Chilton," Will temporizes, and then stops himself on the point of argument he was about to make.

Chilton *knows* - as Will once had - that he has spent the cost of a new android and better on upgrades. He knows his options and his attachments.

"Within the Sybian line, they trade a certain economy of processing power for cost efficiency," Will explains. "I could add a second processor, but you'd notice specific lag between cognitive reaction and physical reaction - depending on which you set as the priority in what situation."

"You cant just increase power in the single-cluster processor it has?" Chilton asks, on an island between desperation and understanding.

"Not without re-outfitting all the rest of the electronics," Will says, apologetic. It isn't his fault, just the way circumstances had fallen. He is still sorry.

"It's just-" Chilton begins, and then seems to stumble over himself. In the pause, Will realizes he's trying to find words that are tactful enough.

"Yours seemed to understand so much more, Mr. Graham," is what Chilton decides on. "Conversationally, at least. There are moments when Kin has true lucidity, or at least he strings together enough of his stock phrases to seem that way."

Will drags his teeth over first his upper, then his lower lip. He isn't quite sure how to respond. He certainly could not judge.

"After a while working intimately with any machine, Mr. Chilton, a bridge is built between user and interface. I'm not sure quite how to explain it - that spark you feel - but, I can tell you that only *you* feel it."

Chilton sighs, a resigned sound on the other end of the line.

"The model you picked is a specialty robot, rather than a companion android. As with all things, they age. New, better things take their place. I'm not saying to replace him," Will has long since given up on trying not to use pronouns.

"Just to accept his limitations. Try not to feel them too acutely when you look at newer things."

He hesitates, and a sudden, crazy instinct raises up in him, wild and urgent, to offer Chilton the contents of the box in the hall. To get rid of that last reminder, now sitting under a bag of dog food as if it weren't a now-slightly-less-high-end technological marvel.

Something stops him. Something low and dangerous in the back of his mind that is reassured by the unknown contents of the box. Schroedinger's coffin.

If he never opens it, perhaps he can keep believing that Hannibal is nearby.

"Thanks, Mr. Graham," Chilton is saying, and Will realizes he hasn't been listening. "You, at least, understand."

Will doesn't. Not in himself, not in others, the strange empathy and compassion on their end for something that could - or at least *should*- never return it.

"It's alright, Mr. Chilton. Is everything else functioning properly?" Will no longer blushes to ask. It has become clinical, as if he were a doctor and not simply a repairman, and perhaps that is why Chilton still comes to him.

"Everything else works just like it did the day you installed it," Chilton assures him. "I'll call you if that changes."

"Goodbye, Mr. Chilton," Will says.

Chilton answers in kind. The line disconnects. Will puts the Glass back in his pocket and finds he has come into the kitchen, his small haven. The tiny window over the small sink leaves a bright patch on the floor where Hannibal used to stand.

You should eat, the voice in his memory says. Will doesn't.

He retrieves the bag of dog food from the box in the hall, frowning when he finds one corner chewed open and leaking a trail of kibble that Winston snaps up behind him.

Will puts the box out of his mind. He does not consider the contents - not when he stubs his toe, not when he puts his keys on top of it and loses them for an hour or two.

The knowledge is there, at the back of his mind like an open trap, waiting to spring. He steps around it, in his thoughts.

Instead he takes up the leash, calls Winston, takes a walk.

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Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> This is getting to be a habit.
>
> "Hello, Mr. Graham," she purrs, as if they were expecting each other. As if Will should always be expecting her. To a point, he is. It does not startle him to find her there, anymore. It's not infrequent enough for his tastes.
>
> Maybe he's just not used to her yet.

Freddie Lounds seems taller than she is, standing in his hallway with one hand stroking along the top of the unopened box and the other stroking Winston's head between. It's hard to see which she is more affectionate toward.

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Maybe he's just not used to her yet.

"Hello Ms. Lounds," he answers, without bothering to hide his irritation.

"You haven't opened it," she observes, as she has on every visit.

Will thinks they are as much in curiosity as business for her. She is coming to see if he is going to build her another man to murder. To see if he still builds machines that scream.

"Way I understood it, " Will says, moving past her with his small bag of groceries, "it was mine to not open."

He sets the bag on the counter. His own shopping is still somewhat basic and haphazard, but he’s remembered enough of Hannibal's work to improvise meals, and he prides himself on it.

"Suppose you're right," she answers, her voice a mocking cowboy drawl from the old videos. She uses it when she thinks he's being stubborn, which means he hears it at least once a visit.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Lounds?" he asks, knowing the answer already.

She produces a memory box from her handbag. They are past pretenses that the drives she wants laid open are hers. Will knows that it is probably a politician's drive, or a businessman

or maybe just some average rich schmuck who couldn't pay his bills for whatever reason.

"I don't do that anymore," Will says, tired of the conversation he knows is coming already.

Freddie moves out of the hall, adopting a foreign, helpless stance and holding the drive against her chest in a matronly clutch.

"I need your help, Mr. Graham," she entreats. "Do a little favor for a gal who did *you* a favor?"

"What *favor*?" Will demands, suddenly angry in a way he hasn't been in years. It flashes up bright and fades quickly; an old light bulb burning out at last.

She glances back at the crate in the hallway, rolling one shoulder up in a mysterious half shrug. "A favor, Mr. Graham."

It wakes the spark of old obsession in him, and for just a moment Will wonders if... but no. Of course not. There was a new robot in the box, an Alexander or a Napoleon, and it might as well be nothing at all.

Will starts putting his groceries away.

"I know you can do it," she begins, appealing to his pride.

"Of course I can do it, Ms. Lounds, but I won't."

"I know you need the money."

"Not as badly as you need the information," he answers, closing the milk into the fridge.

"So ask a price that reflects both circumstances," she suggests, purring her approval at his ruthlessness.

"Triple," he says, putting his hands on the counter palm down and looking her in the eye.

"Double."

"Double and I don't see you again for two months," he offers.

She smiles.

"I'm starting to think you don't like my patronage, Mr. Graham."

He takes the drive from her and settles in at his scarred workbench.

He drops the drive into the read-cradle, contacts down, and opens the screen on his Glass out to tabletop mode. He runs his eyes over the security protocols on the display, assessing. Time consuming, but not impossible.

Will admits he's getting good at these types of jobs.

Freddie leans against the counter in his kitchen and indulges Winston with all of her attention for a while.

Will pretends to be absorbed in his work so he doesn't have to make any conversation.

Finally, he can't pretend to be doing anything but intently watching a progress bar, so he gets up, moves around Freddie in the kitchen and begins making his dinner. Without a word she falls in to help, chopping the onions and carrots he sets out.

"Will you be joining me?" he asks, because he has to.

"Depends," she says. "I don't eat meat."

"Then I'll leave the andoulle in the fridge," he allows. "Do the bell pepper too, please."

He re-tasks from gumbo to stir-fry unhaltingly, and thinks Hannibal would smile. Then, he doesn't think about it.

"What's on all these drives you bring me, Ms. Lounds?" he asks instead, once the vegetables are sizzling in the pan.

"Secrets," she says, infuriatingly.

"Do you know or not?"

"Sometimes, Mr. Graham. Sometimes I know and sometimes I guess," she rolls one shoulder up prettily, and retrieves a wineglass from the cupboard, helping herself to the bottle of red that's been sitting on his counter for a month.

"Sometimes, the government says, 'don't you bat a silly little eyelash, just get the drive and bring it back'," she continues, rifling his drawers for a corkscrew. "Then I don't get to see you at all."

His kitchen is no longer as organized as it once was.

"In this case, Mr. Graham," she says, pausing for a triumphant noise when she finds his thrift store Houdini, "I have a pretty good idea. But it's a surprise."

She affixes the corkscrew to the bottle and works the lever. When the cork pops free, she grins up at him.

WIll suspects that he will not enjoy the surprise.

He turns vegetables in the pan, and finally admits they are done. Dinner is delicious, eaten and savored, but not quite enjoyed. Will takes a glass of his own wine with it, and finds it seems too thick and sweet for his tastes.

He gets up halfway through dinner to check the progress and finds the decoder had either gotten lucky, or the password had been an easily detectable string - characters that commonly went together.

"It's done," he tells her, over the dividing counter. She smiles, raising her glass in a toast before drinking from it again.

"You sure you're not just trying to get rid of me faster?" she grins, moving out of the kitchen to come and have a look at his screen. She leans in close, never guilty of shyness or respect for personal space. She reaches out and manipulates the tabletop display on his glass to see the revealed unencrypted files.

"Let's just see," she muses aloud, looking over the presented files. "Here we are."

She taps gently on an icon, a digi-blueprint named 'disruption.bpx', and an image projects itself across Will's desktop that leaves him suddenly cold with shock.

The plans for a bomb draw themselves in grey and white over his desktop, annotated with colored blocks for detail views and construction notes. He does not need to look at them in detail - he wrote them himself, after all.

"Where did you get this?" he demands, when he has stared long enough to be completely positive of what he's seeing.

"Well," Freddie drawls, grinning viciously. "Out of a personal assistive android, of course."

It's not what Will meant but it puts an image into his mind anyway. Will stares at her, blankly, refusing to give any hint of his reaction to her words. He has had time to practice his non-response.

She sighs and makes an elegant throwing-away gesture with her fingers, casual except for the underlaid violence in it.

"He failed to completely disable all the autonomous risk reporting in his unit," Freddie reveals. "He was apprehended while collecting supplies for this child of yours, Mr. Graham."

"It's not-"
"Please," she cuts him off, her tone just sharp enough to silence him. "I know your signature by now, Mr. Graham, and your fingerprints are *all* over this. It seems our would-be terrorist got his hands on this in trade about six months after your little fiasco."

"So what happened to this plan?" she asks, lifting herself onto the edge of the desk and swinging her legs from the knees, a child waiting for a story with excitement. "Did you lose your nerve?"

"Hannibal wouldn't let me," Will says, and that's all he reveals on the matter.

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Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> "Who did you sell it to?"
>
> Bev eyes him over the counter, and behind her, Zeller shifts anxiously, avoiding eye contact. He knows the confrontation is unlikely to end totally peaceably. He has seen Will and Bev argue before.

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Beverly's mouth firms. She reaches below the counter, and for a moment - just one - Will thinks she's going to pull out a weapon.

Instead she produces a transformable media disc - a hard copy of the memory banks in her security cameras, if the label 'Sec-Cam, March-August '76' isn't some unusual code.

"We pursued it, Will. We did," Zeller tells him.

"They were - stolen?" Will's heart sinks. Who knows how many copies had been made, how many more would-be terrorists now had a bomb that made Hannibal's death meaningless.

Will's mind spins, his heart racing so fast that for a moment, all he can think of is to run away - as fast as he can. From Bev, from the knowledge itself, from the actions of his past. He closes his eyes instead, counting to five and soothing himself.

"How did they know?" he asks.

"I don't think they did," Bev says. "They stole every drive and data device we had in the place, and some more expensive motor skills components."

"We hoped they wouldn't realize what they had," Zeller adds. "When a couple months went by and nothing came of it, we figured we were in the clear."

"We would have told you if we thought there was any danger, Will," Bev assures him.

"It's out there," Will tells her, but his anger is mostly gone. How can he be upset? Nothing was certain in this world, and after all, he had designed the damned thing. Without his work, there was nothing to steal.

"Who has it?" she asks, hands flat on the counter, features fiercely determined and Will knows that if she could, she'd right the wrong.

She can't.

"Maybe just a few people," he says. "Maybe thousands. Freddie Lounds brought me a drive yesterday that she lifted off an anarchist."

"Shit," Bev breathes. Will agrees.

Behind the counter, Zeller looks pale.

Will does not know what he can do about it. Freddie hadn't accused him of anything, just taken her cracked drive and left, explaining that she had 'thought he would like to know'.

"You could try to track it," Bev offers. "Back to the source. Maybe see how many copies are out there."

It sounds hopeless. Will slides his palms over the cool countertop and breathes deep - the dock air smells like the ocean, tastes like salt and seaweed.

"I think it's better if I stay as uninvolved as possible," he says, after a moment to steel himself against the potential consequences.

He had always known that the creation of it - of many of the things that he made - would potentially change things. It is the greatest saboteur of his quiet life, his need to create.

"We'll keep an ear to the ground," Zeller promises.

Will hopes they won't hear anything, that this is all a fluke, shortly to come to an end.

He takes the security camera footage anyway.

"Hey," Beverly says then, while Will tucks it into his pocket. She is leaning ingratiatingly on the counter now, smiling in a nervously winsome expression.

She wants something.

Will does not feel any disbelief at the notion that she would admit a failing only to immediately ask a favor.

"What do you need?" he asks.

"I think I met somebody you'd like," she offers, then hesitates.

Will waits.

"He's looking for modifications like you used to do on your Hannibal," she continues after a moment. "The personality stuff, remember?"

How could he forget? He waits again, letting his silence draw out her words.

"I told him I'd give you his card," she continues, producing her wallet from her back pocket. "He's looking for a compassion chip.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> The card is flowery, pressed real paper with threads embedded, giving it a toothy feel beneath Will's grease-stained fingers. His thumb leaves an oily smudge over the bottom corner, where the contact numbers are printed in purple, metallic ink.
>
> 'Mason Verger,' it reads.
>
> Will shoves it into his pocket and forgets about it. He doesn't do that anymore. He has enough to worry about without descending that far down the path of his past.

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At home, he watches the tape. A man rifles the bins of storage containers, taking parts at random, by the handful. Will sees him pull the changeable memory device he'd once given to Bev from a jar of tools - hidden in plain sight, just one piece of clutter among many. There was nothing to arouse interest or suspicion; the thief had simply seen it and taken his prize.

Will sighs, looking at the man's carefully covered face, and supposes the why and how does not matter.

He forwards the digital video to Freddie, with no attached explanation, just in case.

He pushes the Glass away from him, leaning back on his couch, and Winston belly-creeps over the cushions to settle his chin heavily over Will's thigh. Will eases his palm soothingly over the crown of the dog's head.

There is, of course, nothing he can do. Will is an engineer in theory, but his resources are more akin to a repairman's.

Yet it nags at him, drags his mind back to a desperate time.

Why had he *ever* built it?

It seems easy to question it now, with Hannibal mostly laid to rest in his mind. He remembers, however, wanting to protect what he had made - what he had *built*.

In the end, it had been Hannibal who protected both of them.

Winston nuzzles against him, and Will realizes his hands had gone still. Something else nags at his awareness but he does not pursue it.

He stands up to get both of them dinner, enjoying the warmth of the stove and the comfort of moving with a purpose.

For a time, his mind is quiet, Winston's contented company an example he finds easy to follow.

With too much quiet, when he is done chopping and cutting, and the rice is on to fry - day old and leftover from his meal with Freddie - his mind retrieves the problems of the day and they sit, unsettled. They are as hot and active in his mind as the food in the pan.

He sinks into the chair at his kitchen table, a small square thing for the small, square space. Across from him is an an empty chair. Once, Hannibal had sat there while Will described the tastes and sensations of food to him.

Now he is overcome by its emptiness.

Will gets up, stepping over Winston where the dog lays on the floor watching him with his chin on his paws. Will opens the cabinet and takes down the bottle, a glass.

They hit the countertop with solid, desperate sounds that Will finds reassuring.

He fills the glass with no regard for ice or measuring and takes a sip long enough that the hot, burning sensation spreads deep into his chest. Until his throat threatens to lock up, and Will coughs. He sets the glass aside half-empty.

Better.

He takes the rest over the course of dinner, and refills the glass - it will see him to bed, still awkwardly arranged toward the middle of the room.

Something about that creeps under his skin, hot and stinging like warrior ants. He leans down and shoves his weight against it, pushing until the far side is flush with the wall again, until his slack muscles complain at the effort while he is intoxicated.

A white, thin snake catches his eye, dragging his attention up from the depths of mindless determination. It sits, sinuous and ready to strike on the finished cement floor.

A power cord.

Will gathers it into his fingers and realizes what it is. All of the things holding him up vanish and he sits down suddenly, holding it like shards of glass and waiting for it to - *wanting* it to - cut him.

Winston slinks up behind him and sits down, making an anxious noise.

"Oh, well,' the voice is unfamiliar and sends a jolt down Will's spine. He looks up to find his door open, a stranger at the end of the hallway between kitchen workspace and bedroom.

"I didn't mean to *interrupt*, Mr. Graham," he continues, dark, deep set eyes fixed on Will from behind a pair of square-framed glasses.

A fashion for people who could afford to flaunt corrective surgery, in his case.

Will gets to his feet.

"You are interrupting," he growls, his voice wavering unnervingly, "and you aren't invited to be here."

"But," the man says, grinning broadly, perhaps trying to seem sheepish. It only reveals a wolf. "I have an appointment."

For a moment, Will's mind reels on the information, wondering if he could possibly have forgotten setting one. He runs back over it in his mind, unsure. No - he's positive he's never met this man. There's no mistaking his outlandish suit, the daring color and perfectly tailored fit. The haircut, either, a thousand dollar devil-may-care disarray that sits on his head like it was getting ready to depart it.

The way his garish, oversized coat throws the whole picture into lavish completion. Here was a man, it screamed, who did not need to give a shit what anyone thought.

"You don't," Will says, with conviction. His only appointment is later this week - with the Crawfords.

"But you got my card, Mr. Graham?" the voice matches the picture of the man. Snobbish, assured, but underneath it there is the hint of danger, a country boy shot up too big for his britches.

Will has only gotten one card. He paws it out of his pocket, heavily creased.

'Mason Verger,' it reads, 'See you Tuesday at Nine.'

Verger occupies a shameless amount of space in Will's apartment, watching him gather himself with unveiled amusement. Will does his best to ignore it, wrapping the power cord in an idle twist around one wrist.

He retrieves some aspirin from the cabinet in the kitchen, dispensing a handful into his palm. He tosses them all back, swallowing them dry and enjoying the way they catch and scratch in his throat - a real sensation, a current one.

"Better?" Verger asks, leaning comfortably in Will's hallway and watching his every move. His eyes are small and darkly attentive. His posture is relaxed, but not slack. Calculated.

The effect is not unlike a coiled snake - resting or ready to strike in equal measure.

"Marginally," Will allows.

The painkillers haven't had time to kick in yet, but the habit was soothing enough to function as a placebo in the interim.

"Mr. Graham, if this is really a bad time..." Verger offers, with no intent to hold true to or complete the statement. He is her, he will not go until he is heard. Perhaps not until he is obliged.

"I'm not sure why you're here," Will says, instead of playing polite.

It seems to please his guest.

"Your associates down at the docks spoke very highly of your abilities, Mr. Graham," Verger reveals. "Especially those in manipulating android personalities."

"I don't do that anymore," Will says, his voice raspy like the broken record he feels like.

"You mean you stopped for a while," Verger coerces, smiling. It is not a warm expression, but a convincing one, near to mania.

"I mean," Will insists anyway, "no more personality modifications. If you need a new penis on your Sybian or fine tuning on the motor unit of your Napoleon, *that* I can do."

Will cannot make the statements polite. He does not care to.

Verger's gaze flicks down to the power cord wrapped around his wrist.

"Well," Verger says. "How about selling me your old cast-offs then, Mr. Graham? I would pay handsomely and you could afford to be a little more selective of your clients."

"It's not for sale," Will tells him. He isn't sure if he means the chip or his own integrity.

"But," Verger's eyes light up, "you still have it? The compassion chip?"

Will realizes his mistake in referring to the piece in the present tense. In truth, it still exists, but it has sat unused, exposed to dust and air for so long he doesn't know if it would still work. It hardly matters, Mason surely has the resources to replicate the design and and retrieve the programming.

He should have destroyed it earlier.

"No," Will lies, but he knows it isn't truly convincing. "It's gone. The government confiscated it along with my android."

Verger glances down the hall, at the box taking up space in it. He does not, however, ask. He doesn't need to.

"What about the schematics, Mr. Graham?" Verger asks. "I have very talented scientists who would be more than capable of replicating-"

"To what purpose, Mr. Verger?" Will demands, cutting through his attempts at smooth talk. "Androids were never intended to have feelings. There is no translating compassion into something they truly comprehend."

Mason smiles, slow and sweet, to see something personal come out of Will at last.

It makes him want to retract the statement, to have never spoken at all.

"Here's my final answer, Mr. Verger. There is no chip. There are no schematics. It's gone, and it *should be* gone."

"What if I said," Verger begins.

Will doesn't want to hear it. He knows it will be truly persuasive, and he does not want to be persuaded.

"I don't care," Will says flatly, raising his voice over Verger's.

The man's eyes go cold at Will's rudeness, at his unwillingness to be tempted. When he speaks again, his tone is even, level.

"I have a surviving Hannibal model, Mr. Graham. Of course, without the hands - but otherwise intact. I was given to believe you would be interested."

The information is a cold shock to the system. Will had expected it, he discovered, but Mason Had made one mistake.

Ha had not brought the android with him. Without that evidence, Will cans till convince himself fit isn't true. Without seeing the familiar face, he does not *need* to see it again. Not moving and 'alive' when he had last seen the features still and dead.

It is the promise of a ghost. A corpse. At best, a zombie, mindless and amnesiac.

"You believed wrong, Mr. Verger. I want it no more than the box in the hall," Will spits. "You can go, now."

For a moment, Verger's anger is clearly visible. He had come certain of his place, of Will's place, and that the leverage between them was his. His eyes burn with a frustrated fury that is calculated, cold instead of a heat that would burn out quickly.

"Consider it," Verger says when his composure returns, "you have my card."

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Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> Will tries not to feel that the apartment has shrunk around him when Verger leaves it. Winston settles at his side in the kitchen.
>
> After a time, Will gets up, unwinds the power cord from his wrist and leaves it on the kitchen table, forgetting it. There are parts of Hannibal strewn all through his life, still. The box from Freddie is still in his closet, Hannibal's custom chipset sealed into a mason jar it would be impossible to tell from any of the other. Will knows it, of course.
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He gathers all these together and drops them into the trash in his kitchen.

If he were a stronger man, he would destroy them physically. Instead he promises himself he will see them into the compactor tomorrow. He will let the mechanical device destroy these mechanical devices - and that way it will not feel so much like murder. It will not feel like what Freddie takes her pleasure in.

He collapses into bed but finds no refuge in his dreams. They come in haunting, half-formed images. Dripping blood as dark as oil. Lifeless fingers, strong once but immobile now. Dead and still. He dreams of screaming that goes on and on, until it turns into a metallic grinding shriek, agonized and twisting in his gut until he feels it, the stress of too much torque and pressure.

It feels like a fraying cable, his insides shredding apart in a way he is helpless to stop.

At four A.M. he wakes, drenched in sweat. He stumbles into the kitchen, tripping over the dog who appears worried at his feet. Will punches buttons on the coffee maker until it begins to growl through the heating cycle for the water, and then sits on the cool tile, leaning his forehead into the ruff of fur at the side of Winston's neck.

He just breathes, letting his hands move reflexively through Winston's fur, feeling the friction against his fingertips and the sweat cooling on his skin. By the time the smell of coffee

pervades the kitchen, Will is shivering, but he feels sane. Whole. Aware. He drags himself to his feet and gets a cup of coffee, over-sweetening it so he will drink it faster.

"What am I going to do, Winston?" he asks the dog. He gets a hopeful look in response, the folded ears pushing forward, and supposes he has his answer. Walk the dog.

He showers and changes first, picks up his Glass and running shoes. He puts his headphones in and tries not to expect too much from himself - he has not been running in at least a year, fallen out of the habit.

Wishing now that he hadn't, he and the dog take the stairs down. He hits the street at a run and resolves not to stop until the point of collapse, Winston galloping beside him with his mouth open in sheer doggish joy.

Steam streams from both their mouths in the cool pre-dawn air, and it takes Will a long time to warm with exertion. Music encourages him, reminds his footsteps of rhythm, and once he finds his stride he realizes he isn't quite as out of shape as he had feared.

That nervousness and uncertainty pool in his empty belly with his coffee and fuel him It is a cold energy, a searing one. It keeps him going until even Winston slows down and his own muscles have started to scream with how stiff he'll be later today.

Will's made it downtown and his throat is dry and tight enough to turn his course toward the tame square of green by city hall, where there is a dog park he sometimes takes Winston to. More importantly, a fountain.

Will keeps his foot on the lever for Winston as he himself gulps down freezing water. It tastes amazing, even as it shocks its way down his throat, and Will thinks of the old adage his mother had impressed on him when he was very young. *If it tastes better than it usually does, you really need it.*

So he drinks until he feels nearly sloshing. Then he straightens up, taking a deep breath and stretching himself out. Will feels better. Even though he knows he will regret the sudden, excessive burst of exercise in the morning - perhaps as soon as later today - for now, he feels good. Winston sits panting at his feet, mouth wide to show his teeth and tongue lolling.

For a moment, Will contemplates calling a cab back, but the sun is coming up now. The air is warming. The walk back will be pleasant.

He tugs Winston's leash gently to get the dog back to his feet.

"Have you done drinking?" he asks, putting his foot on the lever to tempt the dog. "A lot of trees and hydrants between here and home."

Winston takes his offer, and Will looks up at the white stone steps and columns of city hall, admiring the way it reflects back the early golden light of morning.

A figure walks up the steps alone in the early quiet. Something about it strikes him familiar, something in the movement. It is slow, but with a certain considering grace. Will looks again,

unable to convince himself he is seeing things.

The man's hair is dark and short, the height just about right. Will finds himself drawn forward, mesmerized. It is a ghost - a specter slowly becoming more and more real, materializing from the next world back into this one.

Will walks forward, straining - rushing to get to an angle where he can see the man's face, needing to know he is wrong.

He is too far away, but at the top of the stairs the man pauses, as if sensing Will running across the green space to catch him. He turns, just partway, and there is no mistaking the profile - Hannibal!

Will forces his tired body into a run, and is drawn up short suddenly by the leash around his wrist. Winston has stopped at the other end of it, pulling, refusing to go further.

"Winston," Will hisses, "come on-!"

He looks back up, seeing that the android is moving again. Will pulls the leash but Winston refuses to relent, barking and surging the other way, struggling against his harness like a fish on the line.

The android does not have any hands. It catches Will's attention as strange, even as Winston's yelping and pulling backs him up a step.

Then, city hall explodes.

Will only comes to wrap his mind around it in the aftermath, only able to comprehend the blinding light in the evidence of his spotted vision, the calamity of sound only comprehended by the ringing it leaves in his ears. He finds himself on the ground, dazed and aching, aware of the sound of approaching sirens, of people yelling and clamoring.

Winston licks his face, curious, concerned, and Will drags himself up, hooking a hand into the harness as he looks back - the air is thick with dust and smoke, but it is not so hard to see that he is not aware of the sudden, burning hole in the skyline.

The city hall is gone, like a tooth missing suddenly from the gums.

Around him, the wails of a city realizing it shriek loud enough to drown his thoughts.

Will gathers Winston close and finds himself lost among a sudden crowd - in their bathrobes and jogging suits, summoned up from breakfast by shock.

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Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Will's apartment feels close and welcoming after his day. He settles heavily at his table, looking down at the blank, scarred wood he had seen the plans on, just days before. He has little question that the bomb used would follow those plans. The weight of the destruction settles onto his shoulders, heavy.

What had he done?

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What had he done?

He had never intended for the bomb to be used, had taken the prototype apart to components the day after Freddie had wheeled Hannibal out of his life, in a fit of shock and grief and uncaring. At the time, he had hoped it would blow apart in his hands, which were certainly no cleverer than Hannibal's. Now, his fail-safe has failed him.

Winston settles tiredly at his side; they had both spent time in the care of the EMTs and then the police, receiving care for the concussive shock, and giving his account of the events.

The withheld details nag at him, but if he was imprisoned it would help neither his cause nor the police's. He isn't sure he can help from here, either. He had not mentioned the make of robot, either. He could not bear to see the name defamed in the news, though he knew there would be footage enough, that someone somewhere would identify the discontinued line and it would scream out at him anyway. At least it would not be his hand that defamed the name.

Suddenly he remembers his task from the previous night, and the conviction to finally free himself from the last ties to Hannibal fails him. Will goes to retrieve the parts from his kitchen trash can.

It's empty - the whole bag gone from the plastic bin. For a moment, Will wonders if he had already taken it down, lost the memory in the fog of his early awakening. Except he remembers his morning decently well, around the jumble the rest of his day had become.

Cold worry slides down the length of his spine. He had not taken it down. Someone had taken an interest, then taken the opportunity while Will had been out of his apartment.

Verger.

Will lunges for the drawer where he had discarded the folded and crinkled business card. Anger at the violation of his space rises sharp and dangerous in him. His search of the drawer turns up only old takeout menus, receipts, and guides for kitchen appliances: junk that accumulates 'just in case'.

He empties it onto the kitchen floor in a fit of desperate anger that cools quickly when he sees Winston nearby, crouched and quiet, watching for the danger to pass.

Sighing, Will sinks to the floor to pick it up. Aside from the trash, nothing in his apartment has been disturbed or removed. He checks his room, all the cabinets in the kitchen. It would be a hell of a thing to explain to authorities, especially today. They had enough to do, without *the Case of Will Graham's stolen garbage*.

"I can't even blame you for not protecting the house," Will tells Winston, gently ruffling his ears and smoothing the fur over the crown of his head to reassure the dog that the anger isn't directed at him. "You were with me."

Winston had, in fact, been protecting him at the time of the break in, more than likely. Briefly, Will feels hopeless, helpless. He stands in the hall and his eyes fall onto the box.

It is tall and square, taking up space in the hallway, in his life. Will wonders why they hadn't stolen it, too, to cover the lesser crime as something simpler.

It doesn't really matter, but his eyes catch on the array of papers on the top, caught there in moments when Will needed to free his hands.

At the bottom, he finds Verger's card - not the crumpled one from his pocket with the note, but a pristine rectangle of cream cardstock printed with metallic purple ink.

Will pulls his Glass from his pocket and dials a number.

"Mr. Graham," her voice is sweet, after the third ring. A sultry, half-sleepy purr. "We had an agreement not to see each other for a few months. Did you get lonely already?"

"I need a favor," he says.

Freddie goes quiet, a sort of anticipatory stillness like a spider on its web.

"You sent me a box," he begins.

"Two, actually, Mr. Graham," she reminds.

"The processor and circulatory pump," he specifies.

"Oh *yes*," she says, suddenly invested.

"They were stolen from me," Will says. "Along with a chipset of my own design."

Quiet for a few moments while Freddie relishes the information, squeezing the vagueness out of her thoughts and draws her own conclusions.

"So they kidnapped Hannibal," she surmises, drawling. "Or at least his remains. You have been getting *all sorts* of the wrong attention lately."

She adds a dramatic sigh at the end, for effect.

"Did you get a copy of that tape I sent you?" he presses.

"Oh, *that*," she says, "I couldn't see anything more than you could."

"Do you think if I sent you footage from the building's security cams," Will proposes.

Freddie picks up his intent right away, making a thoughtful sound to herself. She guesses, "you think it's the same person."

"If not the same person I think they're both working for the same one," Will confides, knowing the intrigue will grab Freddie's interest and hold it.

"You do find yourself in the most interesting trouble, Mr. Graham," Freddie says, brightly. "Does that mean you want to call off our arrangement?"

"It means I'll take a rain-check and call in the payment at a later date," Will says, with little hope of ever getting the peace, certainly not once he admitted he needed her help.

"So who is your stalker?" she purrs her question through his earpiece, warming to the work. "And how does he know where you keep your most dangerous ideas?"

Will doesn't know. He isn't even positive it's Verger - it just seems like too much of a chance. He no longer fully believes in coincidence.

"Look at the tape first," he says. "We'll go from there."

"Okay, you're the boss, for once," she laughs, amused at her own joke. "Send it over."

Will realizes he needs to *acquire* it first. He had not expected to do more than propose the concept. Will never expects people to help him these days.

"Give me some time to get it," he says, sheepish.

She does not laugh as hard as she might have.

"I'll be waiting, Mr. Graham," Freddie assures him. "With baited breath."

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Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Will finds the security on the building's camera databanks so laughable that it's little wonder the would-be robbers had found an opportunity that they were certain of. All they had needed was to copy and re-rout the feed, then watch for Will to leave his apartment.

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It works to Will's advantage too. He splits it open, seeking out his own feed amongst the hundreds from the building. Of course there are no cameras *in* the apartments, but at the entryways, and along the hallways there are cameras at intervals, ostensibly for security.

Will knows that they also monitor comings and goings, to be sure residents follow occupation rules. He does not care - save that suddenly, it seems an excessive amount of information to leave so poorly guarded.

He finds he is not the only one to take advantage of the lax measure. Several hours of blank black fill the camera feed from his hallway, and it resumes again only just before Will returns. It hardly narrows the timeframe for him, making the job much harder - it will be nearly impossible to discern people who came in the front door for a real reason from the one who had entered to rob him.

"Shit," he sighs, pushing his hand over his face in exasperation. Frustration wells up in him - how is he supposed to stop this now that it is loose in the world?

Behind his closed eyelids, it almost seems he can still see the flash of brilliant light that had blinded him in the explosion. He takes a deep breath, counting to ten.

It had been a Hannibal model - he was *sure* of it - stripped of its hands and sent with a bomb that they never could have defeated anyway. Will had known the familiar features, had seen the absent hands out of an intimacy that had bid him look.

It was not *his* Hannibal, of course. No others should still exist, either.

Will retrieves the business card from the top of his desk. a glance at the time reveals it is too late to contemplate a call.

He stands up, pours a glass of whiskey, and calls anyway. He lets it ring.

“Mr. Graham,” Verger’s voice is tired, but amused. “Have you changed your mind?”

Will takes a big enough drink to burn him through this, igniting rocket propulsion in his chest.

“Don’t play innocent, Verger,” Will snarls. He is running on limited steam, he knows. Accusation can only carry him so far without proof.

“Ah but I am Innocent, Mr. Graham, at least until proven guilty of-”

“You stole-” and then Will hesitates - if he’s wrong, he’s giving Mason more information than he should. He has enough money to seek it out if it’s for sale in the world somewhere.

Suddenly, Will is positive.

“You stole my property, Mr. Verger,” Will affirms.

Verger *laughs*.

“I just collected the trash, Will,” he says. “No crime in that, of course.”

"Mr. Verger-" Will starts, and then he stops himself, holds his anger in check. He tries - madness - to reason with the man.

"It shouldn't be used," Will entreats. "When it does - it shouldn't be done."

"So it *does* work," Verger's tone is awed, richly amused.

"Yes but it's - it's incompatible. Wrong. Like training an animal to do something unnatural with electric shock conditioning."

The flavor of silence that greets his statement is not right. Curiosity rather than caution, and Will wonders how much of the world is akin to Freddie; who sees androids as as outlets for horror and aggression.

"Compassion without understanding is a transformative device," Will tries.

"Mr. Graham, I know," Verger responds. He laughs then, a giggle. "It seems to have totally transformed you, after all."

His tone is fascinated, but cold. He is interested, but not invested. Will realizes, then, why the idea of synthetic compassion must interest him so. Mason Verger is a creature to which empathy is totally foreign. Perhaps he hopes by dissecting the artificial logic trees that create it in androids, he can comprehend the process as a man. Not to learn it, but simply to understand how better to *use* it.

The whiskey warmth seems to wear off in Will's belly suddenly. He raises the glass to his mouth aware of how long the silence has gone on, of how loud the rattling ice seems in the midst of it.

"What are you going to use it for?" Will asks.

Mason just laughs. "It doesn't matter. Even if I had it - and I'm not *admitting* I do, Will - you've made it clear you no longer want to be involved in the development."

The familiar usage of his first name grates on him.

"Don't worry your pretty curls over this, Mr. Graham. Keep your head down, shut your mouth, and no one will ever know."

The line goes dead against his ear before he can respond. His Glass takes itself back to the main screen and he looks at it, in disbelieving uncertainty before he finishes his drink.

He pours another, hitting redial, and his Glass tells him the number is no longer active.

Will slams his glass on the table, angry. He feels suddenly, intensely alone. There is now no longer any comforting presence in the apartment. No physical component of his memories.

Now it is just a space occupied by a man, his dog, and a box. A coffin. Will has a third glass of whiskey to calm the whisper of absence the loss of even Hannibal's ghost brings.

He reaches under his work table and his hand closes on a slim, heavy, metal shaft. A tool.

Will pulls out the crowbar and finds it unusually heavy in his slack, semi-drunk grip. The world itself seems to waver around him. With the crowbar in one hand and the bottle now in the other - no pretense of shots or glasses - Will knows where he is going.

It sits in the hall, big for the small space. No wonder he has so often run into it or stubbed his toe. He lifts the bar and makes a sweeping motion over the top that sends junkmail and dust motes flying, filling the air with the sounds of flapping paper and the specks that float and twinkle in the light from the bare, overhead bub.

It is a wooden box, strong enough to hold what is inside. Will looks at it, laid revealed to him at last as an intruder in his home, bare of its camouflage of dog food, sporting goods magazines and flyers from the pet store, stripped of the coffee cups it had hidden behind.

He raises the bottle, drinks. He raises the bar, angling the flattened end toward one nailed brace that seems to crash forward and recede in his vision, a wave against the shore.

He gouges wood deeply when he jams the bar between parts, prying and yanking, levering with limbs that feel leaden. For a time it seems he must chip his way in.

Will sweats and curses, feeling the drunken heat of his own breath expelling fumes through the cavern of his mouth. Wood groans, nails shriek up from their embedment, settled like cicada larvae deep into the place they had made for themselves. Tight and certain for so long they were forgotten, for so long that tree and cicada were for a time the same entity.

Now again, when one had forgotten the very notion of either - the tree so long in view it became invisible; the cicada so long invisible it became nonexistent to the mind - here emerged the cicada, shrieking and twisting its way into the light.

Will drops the nails carelessly onto the floor, born brilliant and then nothing but husks. Defeated concepts of confinement that, being overcome, cease to concern him. Only the next nail holding the box closed and cohesive does - and the next, and the next after that.

When he has pried it up, when only one nail remains bent and stubborn to anchor the four foot panel in place, will hooks his hands over the lid.

The whiskey bottle is empty, the crowbar dropped among the chipped wood and nails.

Will Graham pulls until sweat springs up in the small of his back, until his arms shake with the torque and leverage and then finally - finally, with the slow reluctance of a stream thawing in spring - it begins to give.

Slowly, so Will doubles his efforts. Then all at once, leaving him suddenly sitting on the floor. The lid in his hands jams against his lip, leaving him stung and dizzy for a moment.

Inside, birthed within its thick, translucent white caul, is the shape of a man.

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Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The android is hard to define through the thick membrane of plastic. It sits crouched and inert, and Will's reeling, drunken mind has time to register that the plastic itself is dusty, touched by neglect even through the heavy crating that is now lying destroyed in the hallway.

It is crouched, curled up nearly fetal save for the length of the limbs, folded to save shipping space and oddly vulnerable looking. The skin is pink, made pale with the masking caul of plastic, but Will knows he will find it to be attentively detailed, when he cuts the robot free.

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But it is not a Hannibal, the android held unbreathing in this dusty cocoon. The shape is different. It would stand shorter - by just a bit, Will supposes. The hair is different. The overall build is softer, less intimidating in the more current practice of making assistive androids integrative and nonthreatening.

He thinks it is a Napoleon. Reeling, he presses the plastic flat against the top of its head - a receding hairline in a soft widows peak, and the features will be passing middle age and expressive. It is naked, and the battery is at its feet, a five pound block wrapped in green plastic that wants to be noticed.

Suddenly the whole ordeal exhausts Will. The coffin is open, and the dead have not come back to life. He pokes his fingers through the plastic and fishes out the battery and power cord.

It is a supreme effort to get his feet under him in the mess of his hallway.He drags himself up on the intact edge of the crate and steps carefully through the minefield of junkmail, splinters and nails.

He plugs the battery into one of the kitchen sockets, with no real goal except the vague thought that he at least opened the crate for *some* reason this way.

In the main room, Winston watches tiredly from the bed.

Exhaustion presses needy fingers against Will's back and seems to pull at his eyelids. He turns off the light in the kitchen and goes to join the dog in bed. When he pauses to turn off the hall light, a sharp pain flares up from his foot, then dulls quickly beneath the wash of alcohol in Will's mind.

He limps, wincing, to the bed. He does not want to risk a fall trying to see the bottom of his foot while drunk. He sits next to Winston and pulls the splinter out of the skin of the sole of his foot, yelping when it catches a little before coming free, blood welling up behind it.

Winston watches with concern, then leans over to lick the hurt on Will's foot, trying to soothe the injury. Sighing, Will runs his palm over the crown of Winston's head. "Don't worry about it."

Bitterly, Will thinks if he had just gotten a dog in the first place he never would have needed a robot with compassion.

He falls asleep so quickly after he lays down that there is no time to truly agonize about it.

Will sleeps deep, heavy, dreamless. When he wakes his Glass is shrieking for his attention somewhere in his apartment. It wakes him to the stabbingly bright light flooding his windows, startling him from a sleep that was nearly unconsciousness.

The sudden motion roils through Will's belly, warning, and he stops himself and tries holding utterly still to stop himself from being sick. The shrieking phone seems to stab into his brain with every repetition, while Will tries to refuse the inevitable. His skin is hot, his mouth tastes wet and stale.

Will stumbles into the bathroom, aware of the pain in his foot but unable to treat it with any consideration.

Half an hour later he lays on the hard, cool floor of the bathtub, with hot water pattering down on him from the shower head. His skin feels too sensitive and the rush of water sounds impossibly magnified. For all that, the shower is a comfort, now that his belly is hollow and calm.

The process of higher thought - the sort that isn't driven by agony or necessity - returns to him only slowly. Will remembers drinking a bottle of whiskey dry. When he seeks answer for the overworked soreness in - most all the muscles of his body - he remembers pulling the crate apart nearly by hand. Will groans, the sound hollow and strange in the bathroom acoustics.

He has left himself a mess to clean up. Another mess, he amends. Will briefly desires nothing more than to lay in the bottom of the tub until he drowns. He makes good headway on the plan until the water-waste sensor clicks on and reduces the shower flow by half, cools it to barely warm. Will paws at the controls until the water shuts off.

He stands up only hesitantly, wary for signs of nausea, but it seems to have faded. The throbbing of his skull hasn't, seeming to beat in time with his pulse. He brushes his teeth, rinses his mouth, and begins to put together steps to get himself functional.

Like diagnosing a robot for repair.

He pulls on soft sweat pants and then prioritizes the kitchen over a shirt. Painkillers. Water. Set up the coffee maker. Feed Winston - who whines hungrily at him the whole time he works with the coffee pot - and change his water.

With all this done, Will leans back on the counter with a healthy, cold glass of water and waits for the coffee maker to run. His hand falls on the warmth of the battery he had plugged in to charge the night before, when he'd decided he didn't want to bother with trying to complete the Napoleon's start up sequence when he was drunk.

It leaves him wondering if he *would have, had the box miraculously contained a Hannibal unit. No sense wondering. He pours his coffee and grabs the trash can from the kitchen.*

He sweeps the hallway slowly while he drinks coffee and the painkillers slowly pry the ice pick out of his mind. When the hallways is clean of debris, including the empty whiskey bottle which Will drops carelessly on the remains of the crates side, he returns his empty coffee cup to the sink.

With scissors from the kitchen, he cuts the rest of the plastic carefully from the Napoleon. He wraps it over the trash can and considers the folded robot over his cup of coffee.

Well, if he gets it up and dressed, it can carry all the trash down. Will goes to get the battery from the kitchen, refilling his cup while he's there.

He peels the green plastic off the battery, hefting it in one hand before the flashing notification light on his Glass reminds Will of what woke him.

He sets the battery down and picks up his phone. He has missed several calls. Will sighs, cues up his visual voice mail, and scrolls through the messages with a thumb.

Hi Will it's me Bev(?) , I was wondering if you had seen the News? I think you should be looking at it. They say well it shows a Hannibal at the scene before city hall was bombed. Grainy (?) call back and tell me you're okay okay?

Well, no surprise that surveillance had caught what specific make of an android it was. It's not news to Will. He scrolls to the next message, from a number that isn't in his registered contacts.

Mr. Graham this is detective Pazzi with the Baltimore police department

He scrolls beyond the message, uninterested in dealing with that situation yet. If the detective wasn't on his doorstep, the need was not immediate. The last message is from Freddie.

Hey, I got sick of waiting around for that footage so I went ahead and got it myself. You should move out of that place. I saw what was holding you up, but I think I found a way

around the holes. I'll get back to you with the rest, don't you worry your pretty curls about it

Will puts the Glass back down on the counter and picks the battery back up. He returns to the hall and considers the android, crouching down to access the battery input panel located along the spine in the back. The skin is new and feels dryer and cleaner than he's used to. He finds the seam and pulls it up to reveal the battery compartment. It springs open when he works the catch, opening the internals of the android to his eyes. A yellow pictorial sticker demonstrates the proper orientation for the battery.

He pushes it into place, watching the small internal LED come on to indicate a good connection and a good charge. Will closes the hatch, smooths the skin back into place, sitting back against the opposite wall and waits for the Napoleon to wake.

It comes up slow, stirring only after it has run through system checks and diagnostics, reaching out into the web to set its internal clock.

When it lifts its head and opens its eyes the movement is faster than Hannibal's, well orchestrated and precise.

It's the eyes that leave Will most unsettled, an intense, piercing blue when he has never wanted to see any but brown.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

> Will finds it a shame that such an expressive set of features - not quite handsome, but piercing and attentive when it was listening - seemed to be held in check to just a few simple emotions. Dull and uninspired. Automatically, he runs through what would be required to amplify and expand its expressiveness.
>
> The opportunity for such a blank slate would have once excited him, but now it only seems tiresome and repetitive. Even Hannibal had come with a number of learned adaptive behaviors already in his repertoire that Will had found damnably hard to erase afterward.

"Function list-"

The Napoleon's voice is dry and cultured, trying too hard for a neutral accent. Ultimately, it fails to pull itself out of the faint hints of British accent that comsim voices tended toward.

"Assistive reminder services," it lists. Will sighs. The voice is dry, the programming a bare, neutral bland. Will finds it a shame that such an expressive set of features - not quite handsome, but piercing and attentive when it was listening - seemed to be held in check to just a few simple emotions. Dull and uninspired. Automatically, he runs through what would be required to amplify and expand its expressiveness.

The opportunity for such a blank slate would have once excited him, but now it only seems tiresome and repetitive. Even Hannibal had come with a number of learned adaptive behaviors already in his repertoire that Will had found damnably hard to erase afterward.

"Language and college subject tutoring," the android is continuing. Will stops him with a lifted hand.

"Can you cook?" he asks.

It processes the answer, still learning Will's voice, but it is picking up quickly.

"Cooking is among my physical capabilities," it affirms.

"Make lunch," Will tells it.

"What would you like?" It is more linguistically clever than Hannibal had been at the start, speaking more colloquially where Hannibal had been strictly technical.

"Are you capable of improvisation?"

A blink, a motion of the eyebrows, a little twist of the mouth. Then, it turns to investigate the kitchen. Will thinks Napoleon's expressions may have some promise after all, and it seems to have a specific grasp on communicative silence.

It looks clumsy and oversized in Will's clothing - their build is just different enough for Napoleon to look ungainly in the only pair of pants Will had found to fit. They are straining at the button over the android's thicker waist. A well stretched and relaxed flannel shirt completes the comical mis-match against the android's aristocratic, middle-aged features. Will does not care enough to remedy the indignity.

There is a stationary hole in Will's habitat where the unopened crate had been. Napoleon had carried it effortlessly down to the garbage once Will had dressed him. Will supposes he should place a table in the void to catch coffee cups and junk mail. In the meantime, more serious aspects of his life call for his attention.

Deciding to let the Napoleon sink or swim in the kitchen, Will retrieves his Glass. Winston is watching the 'stranger' move in their space, one paw lifted and head tilted whenever Napoleon has food visible in his hands. He cannot help his smile - Winston will learn quickly that androids are not programmed to be suckers.

He activates the Glass and returns Freddie's call first.

"Hey Will, " she greets - there had barely been time for her device to ring. "Late morning, huh? I hope you weren't up too late trying to fill that gap in the video feed."

Her bright enthusiasm reminds Will of how sluggish and aching his body and mind are. He resolves to stay away from whiskey for a long time.

"No, I was - otherwise occupied," he admits. "I tried to get access to the feed, but-"

"Someone had already been there," Freddie agrees. "Or else your camera had a very specific and unlucky blackout."

"You said - your message said - you had another way," Will prompts.

Freddie makes a pleased sound - enjoying the reminder of her own cleverness. Her breath makes a heavy sound against his ear, nearly a chuckle.

"They didn't get all the entryways," she reveals. "So I thought - we just have to watch the exits."

"That could be hundreds of people," Will says.

"You bet."

"How do we narrow it down?"

"Well," Freddie purrs, and he can *hear* the grin. "I said they didn't get *all* the entries."

"So there's no way of -"

"Will," she interrupts his exasperated outburst. He goes quiet, trying not to let the pain in his head hasten his agitation with Freddie's usual antics.

She waits a beat, until she is certain he takes her point on the subject of interruptions. Freddie continues,

"They blacked out the back entrance interior camera, but there is a municipal device in that alley."

Will bites his lip - a municipal camera should not be within Freddie's ability to access. Nobody could, at least in theory, without a subpoena and a strong case for illegal activity. Freddie has her methods - and Will is pretty sure he's better off not knowing.

"Roughly an hour and a half after you go *walkies*, a man exits onto the street with a trash bag," she reveals. "When I checked the front door, it shows him entering forty five minutes earlier, with no bag."

"Are you sure it's not some resident taking out their trash?" Will finds the news hopeful, but he cannot afford a wild goose chase.

"Sure," she agrees. "The municipal cam bio-ID'ed him. He doesn't live in your building and he's got a record, Mr. Graham. A record, *and* some interesting friends."

"How interesting?" Will asks. For a moment - just one - he hopes he is wrong. That somehow, some way, all of this is unconnected. It is a faint hope that dies quickly.

"Does the name Verger ring a bell?" she asks, and her tone betrays her confidence that it will.

"Unfortunately," Will sighs.

"Interesting," she says. "You have bad luck, Will."

"I know," Will agrees, "I met him."

"What?" her tone escalates, and the sudden sharpness stabs into his ear drums and brain simultaneously. "You *met* him?"

Will groans, leaning back in his seat. He becomes aware of a proximity, and finds that Napoleon is standing behind him, polite and silent with a bowl and plate in his hands. Will wonders how long it's been standing there. The bowl is still warm enough to steam, so he supposes it has not been overly long.

"Yes," Will says, clearing a space on the table for Napoleon to set the food down, adding, "- thank you. Mason Verger was here in my apartment. Is that so strange?"

Freddie scoffs. She is quiet for an uncharacteristically long time. Will lets the smell of food draw him in - the plate is a sandwich, toasted golden with melted cheese peeking from between. The soup is red and rich looking, and despite his earlier illness, Will finds it too appealing to resist. He tears a corner off the sandwich, plunging it into the soup. It proves to be tomato - creamier than he's used too - when he eases the piece into his mouth and chews.

"What did he want, Will?" she asks, when she has gathered her thoughts. He tries not to chew in her ear, swallowing quickly to answer her.

"Hannibal."

"You don't have one anymore," she observes.

"He wanted the -uh - modifications," Will corrects himself. "He offered to give me another Hannibal unit for the chance to make copies of my designs."

Freddie makes a 'huh' noise, giving Will a pause in which to eat more food. It is plain, uncomplicated fare, but it does not tax his stomach. Will finds it comforting, reminding him of warming up on cool days after school.

"What would he want with humanizing elements?" Freddie asks, but the tone sounds rhetorical enough that WIll doesn't think he needs to say he has no guess. "Will - he had a Hannibal model?"

"He said he did," Will answers, careful of what he's implying. "I never saw it."

A point strikes him then, something Verger had said. "Freddie, he said it didn't have hands."

Like the one he had seen at City Hall before the explosion. The one that could likely be seen now as easily as turning on a news feed. It all comes together in Will's mind.

"Freddie, he used it to blow up City Hall somehow," he says, miserable and suddenly not hungry. He pushes the food away, half eaten.

"Well," she agrees. "I get that part - using 'your' robot and your bomb - that's his version of irony. What I don't get is why a suspected leader of *Destabilize*-"

"Destabilize?" Will yelps, instantly regretting the level of his own voice. He knows the group - *everyone* did. It was a radical anarchist organization, using fear and pain to try and prove its terrifying point; promoting the complete destruction of the current governing and economic system in order to make way for a new way of life. Violently, if necessary.

They had so far, found it *very* necessary. Will swallows, thinking about past actions attributed to the group. Assassinations - of lives and character. Revealing inciting information meant to rile and upset the public. Sabotage. Now - they had Will's bomb. The one that could not be dismantled by the government's pet project.

"Why do they want-" Will asks, struggling to line up his words. His mind is working at it, trying to make sense of it even as he asks. "Why would they want to humanize their robots?"

"That beats me, Mr. Graham," Freddie answers wryly. "I mean, I have *my* answer to that question, but you don't like it."

"I'm sure I won't like this one, either," Will answers. He indulges a miserable sigh. "What does compassion have to do with terrorism?"

"Maybe everything," Freddie answers. "I seem to recall your *compassionate* robot threatening me with a meat cleaver."

"You threatened him first," Will defends, but he allows that she is correct. "But that's - unpredictable at best. The rest of Hannibal's systems locked him out of the action."

"Clearly we're dealing with an agency capable of disarming or circumventing those protocols," Freddie reminds. "Though only partially."

"What do you mean?"

"The City Hall bombing involved no casualties," she tells Will. The shock of the knowledge - the complete relief - that overtakes him is nearly overwhelming. "In fact, it was deliberately carried out before the workforce had arrived for the day."

It makes sense to Will, though he had thought it might be a distraction meant specifically for him. "Of course. It's the only way to get an android to do it."

"Even that much," Freddie observes, "you'd have to practically neuter it to even get it to carry a bomb in the first place. There's no way to get them to knowingly harm someone - let alone possibly dozens or hundreds of people - without removing so much programming as to render it inoperable."

Will has to agree. Androids were very carefully constructed to be safe. It was an intrinsic part of them, inseparable from their basic capacity to function.

"So why has he gone to so much trouble," Will asks, "To add even more programming?"

Freddie has no answer for him.

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Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

> Will brings the schematics back up on his desk, and looks at them, as if forcing himself to stare will somehow present an option. It is as tricky as he remembered - yet not impossible. A human could undo it, if not a robot. It was designed to work against the natural flaws in robotic dexterity. Specifically, Hannibal's dexterity.
>
> It hardly mattered - for all their clever hands, the Hannibal units were effectively gone.

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It hardly mattered - for all their clever hands, the Hannibal units were effectively gone.

One less, even now, Will thinks. The one at City Hall had obliterated itself - it had been carrying the bomb inside itself. It seems a waste, but Will allows he has a certain attitude toward androids that not everyone shares.

Will does not allow himself to mourn the android. The thought creeps in - once - that he could have saved it, if he had only agreed to Verger's deal, but that still would not have made it *Hannibal*. Not his Hannibal.

"Master Graham," Napoleon, interrupts his thoughts.

Will looks up. "I'd rather you didn't call me that."

Napoleon waits, cocking its head and looking expectantly at Will for a correction. Will offers a half hearted smile, looking back at Winston and finding the dog sitting patiently on the bed.

"Will is fine," he says at last, "no Master either, please."

Napoleon nods, understanding. "Will, is there anything else you require of me?"

Will does not think there is. He has grown self-sufficient in his years without Hannibal - and he had always tended to the majority of his chores. He remembers the anxiety that seemed to come over Hannibal when he was not allowed to perform his functions.

It must be magnified, here, when Napoleon does not even *know* his. Will isn't certain what to tell it. The apartment is small, more or less clean. He has little appetite, and he cannot voice

his current considerations aloud to Napoleon without triggering at least one discriminatory safety protocol.

"I'm sorry Napoleon. There's not a lot for you to do here," Will apologizes. He did not *need* an android, or Napoleon would not have spent so long in a box.

"I could, perhaps, tidy up?" Napoleon offers. Will glances back at the shabby main room, the unmade bed, his usefully cluttered work bench. He takes the hint, and it will buy him some time to consider Napoleon's continuing presence in his life.

"Don't touch my workstation," Will instructs, "but go ahead and clean to your heart's content."

Napoleon's wry expression is only a degree or two shy of 'good'. Will thinks, with only a little work to reverse the enforced blandness, he could fix the expression. Some programmer must have labored, working carefully just within protocol for assistive robots.

"If I were to clean to my circulatory pump's effective function, I would continue to do so for the next sixteen years before a replacement was required."

"I haven't heard robot banter for a long time," Will observes, remembering how long it took to convince Hannibal he did not need constant reassurance that his companion was nothing but a lowly robot.

"I didn't miss it," Will finishes.

"May I ask about your previous assistive android unit?" Napoleon asks, and Will recognizes engagement protocols. Napoleon is trying to measure him carefully, unobtrusively. Gathering information in order to better anticipate Will's needs. To anyone else, it would seem harmless banter, but to Will it is obvious. Sophisticated, but still clear.

It is beyond the childish curiosity he had installed in Hannibal, instead a well-formed and integrated behavior. Seamless.

"You know," Will tells Napoleon. "I'd rather you didn't."

Napoleon nods without looking offended. He moves away to clean. Will plans on stopping him before sixteen years have passed.

He closes the schematic. Staring at it has not provided him with any epiphanies. It is unlikely to start doing so. Freddie had promised to look into what she could get about Verger's known properties and activities.

It left Will with only one lead he had not pursued. He is not sure he wants this conversation to happen so close to Napoleon. He does not want to endure more of its clever curiosity.

Will picks up his Glass and whistles for Winston - who is currently crouching in front of Napoleon with his his favourite pink stuffed toy in his mouth, attempting to entice the android to play with him instead of cleaning. Dog and android both look up at the sound.

He displays the leash and the dog comes running. The android - thankfully - does not.

"I'm going out with the dog," Will says. Though he does not need to explain himself, it seems polite. "Don't let anyone else in while I'm away, please."

"Alright," Napoleon agrees. "Do you want me to log any visitors or relay contact information?"

Will doesn't think it will be necessary, and he's almost sorry he mentioned it - now he has to think about it. He sighs, clipping the leash onto Winston's collar.

"Log any visitors," he decides, running his hand over the crown of Winston's head, and then pointing at the floor. Winston leaves the toy. "Don't give out any contact information. And remember what I said about my work bench."

Napoleon's smile is a shade closer to unsettling than Will likes. He will have to adjust it, even if he knows it's a slippery slope to start tinkering again.

He trots down the stairs instead of taking the elevator, and his body quickly protests the abuse of the past several days. His thighs and calves ache, and he is sore down his lower back, over-exercised. Even Winston keeps a moderate pace, his stride the lateral, automatic trot that is most efficient.

"You too, huh?" Will asks the dog. Winston glances up at him curiously, ears tipping forward as he listens.

Will loops the handle of the lead around his wrist and brings up the incoming call log on his Glass. He selects detective Pazzi's name from the list. Keeping to the walking paths of the city, he waits while it rings.

"This is Detective Pazzi," the voice that answers on the third ring is distracted, accented in a European mode that Will can't immediately identify.

"Detective Pazzi," Will confirms, suddenly uncertain. "I got your message yesterday. I'm sorry I only had time to get back to you today."

He can hear Pazzi take a breath, then a faint sound of air and the intimate sound of breathing fades away. Will realizes he must be checking the display of his Glass - Will hadn't thought to identify himself.

"Mr. Graham," his voice comes back on the line, Glass re-situated against his ear if he has not transferred to a headset. "I'm sorry, I left a lot of messages yesterday."

There is a pause. Will waits for it, supposing that Pazzi is accessing his personal notes, refreshing himself on what he needed Will's input on. Will doesn't bet for an instant that his call won't be recorded.

"Mr. Graham, I'm calling regarding the statement you gave to the police on Tuesday, at nearly 2pm in the afternoon," Pazzi informs.

"Okay," Will says.

"I understand you witnessed the bombing directly?"

"Yes. I was in the park at city center, with my dog."

"And I understand that you stated at the time of your interview that you believed you saw an android entering the building prior to the explosion?"

"Yes," Will sees no reason to counteract his earlier statement.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Graham. I know Tuesday must have been a very overwhelming day for you," Pazzi continues, and Will does not immediately answer - he does not quite understand the thrust of the conversation.

"Were you able to identify the make of the robot?" Pazzi asks, into the extended silence. Something about his tone puts Will in mind of a fly fisherman casting a baited line. He is hoping to hear nerves in Will's tone, to catch him at something. There is an answer - or lack of answer - that Pazzi expects to hear.

"They say on the news that it's a Hannibal model, Detective," Will answers carefully.

"Yes," Pazzi agrees. "Did you identify it that way at the time?"

"Detective, I may have," Will says, and he does not have to play up his confusion much. "But there are images of him on the news and I would say he's a Hannibal model."

A pause. Will feels a note has been made. Then, Pazzi asks, "he?"

Will can't understand this paranoid line of circular questioning. He sighs in exasperation, stopping in the footpath.

"The Hannibal line are male-presenting androids, Detective Pazzi."

"And would you say you are familiar with that line?"

"What are you driving at?"

"I have received information that you owned one of these units, Mr. Graham, recently."

Will places the accent at last, in the stress and length of the last word. Italian.

"Then your records should show that it was surrendered to a government agent at the time those units were recalled," Will says bitterly. "I can give you his individual identification to check against the remains if that would *help*."

"Thank you," Pazzi says warmly, "It would."

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Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Will cannot help feeling anxious after he turns the number over to Pazzi. What would he do if something other than what he had believed had happened? He had not *seen* his Hannibal turned over to the government, had no evidence save a couple of spare parts that the android had been scrapped. Nothing but his instinct to avoid hoping too much told him to believe that Hannibal was truly gone.

Even now, it feels too desperately hopeful to even *question*. He trusts Freddie, Pazzi will check the records, and he will find that Will's Hannibal is truly gone.

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It is only the smallest part of him that thinks, achingly, *but what if he finds something different?* That part spins like a tornado in his mind.

It keeps him up at night, mind stirring in the same useless, answerless riddle over and over. Will twists and turns with the force of it, until Winston abandons the bed as a lost cause.

No line of logic can defeat the question - if Hannibal has escaped destruction, he could be anywhere. If Will had been offered back the same one, Verger had detonated it with the bomb at City Hall. No matter what road he took, it did not matter. His Hannibal was as gone at this moment as he had been the instant he had fried his own logic and memory devices.

He tries everything he can think of, laying stubbornly in bed after he knows that determination will not render him unconscious. He counts, loses track, counts again, and tosses over on his small bed.

A faint glow illuminates the far corner of the room, and Will stares at the pale white light that indicates that Napoleon is charging. He does not need to be - the units are equipped with more efficient batteries, and self charge when they are in motion, requiring access to fresh power only once every several days.

It was all he could think of to do, to settle back into the routine he had kept with Hannibal. His apartment is too small for the android to remain active at night.

Will finds his arms flung out and reaching, laying across the mattress as if his hands missed those that had once joined with them. He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes again. He can nearly *feel* Hannibal's cold hands, palms pressed against his own. The past is gone. Will knows that he cannot turn the course he has already taken now. Yet his mind refuses to relent - a record stuck on repeat.

Scratching his nails over the thick sheets, just for any tactile sensation that isn't emptiness, Will makes an angry sound and throws himself over again, further tangling into the mess of his blankets - now in a twisted bunch rather than lying flat. He stares at the blank wall and wishes he could rewrite his faulty processes as easily as an android's. He envies Napoleon the ease of his rest.

Near three, his mind goes quiet. Will still cannot sleep, but the agony is less. He watches numbers change on the alarm clock until they lose meaning, exhaustion heavy on him and then when they resolve themselves again to 4:38, he gets up.

Will does not make any coffee, in some hope that perhaps he might again return to sleep. Napoleon's pale charging light has turned green to indicate a full charge. Will doesn't bother to wake the android.

"Winston," Will calls, and the dog appears from the kitchen, looking disdainfully at the leash. Will supposes he has had as much of early walks as he wants, that the dog must pick up on Will's mood.

"You don't want to come, huh?" Will asks. Winston pads past him, dragging himself with exaggerated laboriousness up onto Will's bed. He turns two circles and lays down, looking dolefully at Will.

"You'd better watch the house, then, Will tells him. Winston yawns.

It is cool outside, and dark. Will does not hurry today - his motions feel slow and clumsy, like running from danger in a dream. The world seems gray and foggy around him and he sees it only in pieces. His tired mind is content not to bother forming even a concept of his surroundings until Will stops to get his bearings, going on muscle memory.

When he stops to catch his breath he realizes the sun is up, that it is nearing six but the day promises to stay cloudy, for long periods of late fall rain. Will breathes out and the heat of his breath makes steam. It will not be much longer until snow.

The streets are beginning to fill with cars, morning commuters with long drives or with errands to see to before work. Will supposes he should find some - soon, before he needs to run into his savings. The thought drifts in his mind for a while.

Absently, he pats his back pocket for his phone - and finds the Glass is missing. Probably still sitting on the counter in the kitchen. Will sighs and turns back for home.

He is nearly there when he becomes aware that a car has slowed, pacing him, drawing near to the curb. Will shies away nervously, wary and exhausted. The car is black with one occupant, the window rolled down on the driver's side.

"Mr. Graham," the voice is familiar somehow. Will can't place it. "We need to speak."

Will stays out of reach but stops, staring. It is a middle aged man in the car, in an inexpensive suit, an ugly tie patterned with Daffy Duck and golf balls. His hair and beard are a uniform short length and silver gray color. Will does not know him, but isn't sure he's the sort who would work for Verger.

The man fumbles in his coat pocket and then produces a black leather billfold, displaying the contents as a badge, an ID, with a small picture.

"Detective Pazzi," Will guesses. Pazzi smiles. "It's Six A.M."

The tone conveys Will's displeasure clearly. though he had agonized all night on what news Pazzi might deliver, he finds the thought of facing it now unpleasant. Will wishes he had some coffee.

"I suspected you might be an early riser," Pazzi says, "to jog all the way to City Hall from your apartment when you did."

It's a fair point. Will relents just a little, though he still dislikes being tracked down this way. Behind Pazzi, an angry commuter jams on the horn, unable to get around his car in the thickening traffic. Pazzi winces - his features are hangdog and amiable, not classically handsome.

"Why don't you climb in, Mr. Graham?" I'll take you for coffee. I have news and more questions," Pazzi proposes, over the strident angry sounds of honking. He sounds apologetic about the latter.

Will sighs, seeing no good in refusing. He climbs in behind Pazzi, feeling like a chauffeured passenger, or a prisoner. The honking lets up as Pazzi eases back into motion - he is a smooth driver, a calm one.

"I called you this morning, several times," Pazzi explains, turning toward the center of town. It sounds like an excuse for chasing Will down outside his apartment.

"Ah yeah, I forgot my Glass on the counter," Will says.

"I was a little worried," Pazzi says, and he smiles as if at his own silliness. It seems a strange sentiment to Will - he could have easily been asleep as out.

"You thought I skipped town?"

Pazzi shakes his head, "No, I knew it was a possibility, but since you gave such a strong statement - well."

He shrugs, a loose amicable gesture on his softer frame. He finishes, "call it a cop's instinct."

He turns the car into a parking lot, a small diner that does not carry an international logo.

"Ever been here?" Pazzi asks, making friendly conversation. "They have amazing coffee and eggs benedict that'll make your arteries sing as they freeze up."

Will climbs out, chucking at the underhanded praise. He isn't sure he's hungry, but he is ready for coffee at last. Inside, it is busy but not packed, and Pazzi signals a waitress, announcing his presence with a friendly wave. He leads Will to a booth in the back, moving through the dining area with familiar ease.

Will wonders how hardened the good detective's arteries are. He settles into one padded bench, and the instant Pazzi is across from him a waitress sets two white coffee cups on the table, pouring for each of them before she leaves the carafe and a full creamer.

"Are you having the usual, Ray?" she asks, and Will resists the urge to smile - at least the detective did not have a passion for donuts.

"Please, Macy, if you would," Pazzi agrees. "Though my friend might need a moment longer to decide."

"I'm not hungry, thank you," Will answers. He is not full, certainly, but there is no desire to eat.

"Are you sure? Well," Pazzi asks, adding to the waitress, "perhaps once he's had some coffee, his appetite will wake up."

The waitress smiles, and it is not forced, Will notices. Pazzi is not the sort of loyal customer that the establishment minds having.

"You said you had news for me, detective?" Will asks, picking up his coffee gratefully.

"Some," he allows, after swallowing his own first sip. He sets the cup aside, twisting it on the table until the handle is oriented a certain way.

"I looked up the serial number you gave me, and the records verify your statement," Pazzi says, watching him. He turns the coffee cup another full rotation. " To an extent."

If he wanted a reaction, he should not have engaged Will before seven A.M. He waits, having spent the whole evening guessing at what-ifs. There is no sense running through it all again, when the answer will be given to him.

"We - records, rather - do show the android turned over in a previously disabled state to one of our contracted operatives." He does not need to check his notes for the name, "a Ms. Freddie Lounds."

Will nods.

"From there, she filed the correct paperwork for reclamation of the unit and turned it over for credit and disposal," Pazzi continues, telling more of the story than Will needs. Will drinks his coffee and waits for the new information.

"From there it gets fuzzy," Pazzi reveals, watching Will very closely.

Will's heart skips a beat.

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Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

"Fuzzy how?" Will demands, setting down his coffee. His hands feel suddenly unsteady and he feels compelled to watch Pazzi as closely as the detective is watching him.

"Intake at impound has either misplaced the paperwork or misplaced the android."

Will can feel each individual heartbeat pass through him, and time seems to stretch between them, rendering the beats into small earthquakes. He does not want to hear what comes next, uncertain whether to hope or to ready himself for the acceptance of finally knowing Hannibal's fate. All his thoughts from the night before seem not to matter.

"Is that all?" Will asks, after what feels like a small eternity.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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"Is that all?" Will asks, after what feels like a small eternity.

"I'm not sure," Pazzi admits, "I spoke to impound, and while they were quick to reassure me they're certain the robot went into reclamation, the man who accepted it no longer works there. It seems he lost a little too much paperwork."

"I didn't know," Will says and the coffee feels suddenly too heavy in his hollow belly. He tries to resist asking, and Pazzi lets the silence sit between them until the waitress delivers his plate. She asks Will if he's changed his mind, and he shakes his head numbly.

Pazzi uses his fork to cut through the fried eggs and biscuit, yellow hollandaise running across his plate as he sections off a bite-sized piece. He considers Will for a long time while he chews.

"Mr. Graham, before you answer this I want you to consider what you're going to say carefully," Pazzi says, gesturing with his fork. Will wants to look away, feeling trapped under the serious weight of Pazzi's gaze.

"How would you describe the nature of your relationship with your Hannibal?" he asks.

Will blushes automatically, unable to help the reaction. He was unprepared for the question, for the shocking intimacy of it. He cannot form an answer for a long time, dropping his gaze though he knows it makes him look guilty. Pazzi has no right to this part of him, and yet it was this part of Will that had driven him to such extremes and put him here.

"We were friends," he admits, though it burns Will to reduce it to that small of a word. He would have gone as far as he did for only that much, and Pazzi doesn't need more than that. It is enough for most to condemn him as half-mad. Will waits for judgment to be passed, for some assessment of his sad, lonesome life to be made.

Pazzi is quiet for a long moment, then comes the quiet sound of his cup hitting the table. He does not comment on Will's social life.

"Is that why you were so reluctant to surrender your android?" Pazzi asks, and then, before Will can answer he presses on. "Is that why you designed that bomb?"

Will is startled to silence, looking up suddenly. There is still no judgment in Pazzi's gaze , and Will wonders if he is trying to fish for information, or to surprise a confession out of Will. He shakes his head warily, wondering why they aren't at the station, and when he should exercise his right for a lawyer. Pazzi continues eating casually.

"I have a theory, Mr. Graham, based on personal experience," Pazzi reveals slowly. His game seems to involve more patience than Will usually sees from police. He has a steady nature, and Will's initial impression of a hound dog is reinforced. It makes Will anxious, desperate to explain himself. It's very clever.

Will holds his coffee in both hands and says nothing. He is not sure what he can say without digging the hole deeper, and Pazzi seems to be going somewhere.

"I'm in the same boat as you are, Mr. Graham," Pazzi begins. Will eyes him darkly, skeptical of this attempt at rapport. Pazzi waves his fork defensively, "I know how that sounds."

Will continues staring. They both know how it sounds then; false, ludicrous, reaching. It will take a lot more for Will to believe him. He reaches for the coffee carafe, refilling his half-empty cup.

"Prior to my assignment with the police department," Pazzi begins, his accented voice settling comfortably into a storytelling cadence. "I was in the army. Studied at Hazdev in Alabama, then Felix Centre."

If that's supposed to mean something to Will, it doesn't. It sounds technical, like ingrained military jargon.

"While I served, they put a new disposal method into testing. I volunteered."

Will finally feels understanding creep in. "You're on the bomb squad."

"Technically PSBT," Pazzi agrees, "with the police, Mr. Graham. Not the FBI or Military."

Will can guess the rest, he thinks. With a feeling akin to falling into a trap, he ventures, "you worked with the new androids. The ones designed to defuse bombs?"

Pazzi nods. "I was assigned to partner the prototype unit."

Will sits back. It makes sense, but barely. It seems a small world. "How are you - are you really a detective, then?"

Pazzi smiles, seeming to find the question clever.

"Explosive ordinance disposal is not a full time job," he explains. "Like SWAT, PSBT is made up of regular officers who have extra training and qualifications."

Will does not know enough to argue against that, but it seems to make sense. The training and qualifications would suit Pazzi to the investigation of a case he had never had a chance to apply his other skills to. But it doesn't fully reconcile with Pazzi's claim to understand Will. There's more to the story.

"For a while, the android was a joke," Pazzi tells him, "like a baby. Made a lot of stupid mistakes, communicated poorly."

Will has memories that are similar, but not identical. His life had never depended on Hannibal while the android was learning, but he remembers the mistakes - the occasional slipped processes and disorganized logic trees.

"But Tig - that's his name, Tigranes -" Pazzi continues, "did learn, faster than a child. Better. I began to see the potential the government thought he had.

"Even when the government stopped seeing it, I think," Pazzi sets down his fork. He pulls back the cuffs of his cheap suit, extending his hands. For the first time, Will notices how scarred they are. The knuckles are criss-crossed, the backs of his palms etched. His wrists are a wreck, Will notices, and he has to look twice and closely.

"They were severed," Pazzi confirms when Will looks up with a questioning expression. "The left completely, the right three quarters of the way. *Destabilize* got the wise idea of boobie-trapping bombs at their only access point."

Pazzi shakes his sleeves back down into place, leaving Will stunned. He isn't sure what to say, cannot totally escape from the image that forms itself in his mind. Helplessness and agony overwhelming anything while a bomb counted down toward death.

"Tig finished that job, scooped me and my missing appendage up, though he was never trained for rescue," Pazzi continues. All he needs to explain, in conjunction with his current presence and appearance.

"When the new units went into production, they wanted to scrap the prototype," Pazzi says. "Tig's my partner - a friend. I stirred up enough fuss that we both got reassigned - continuing field testing with public disposal units."

"You saved him and sacrificed your career," Will says, leaving it half a question.

"He saved my life," Pazzi says, "and I believe you might have felt as strongly about saving your Hannibal."

"I didn't go through with it," Will answers carefully. "It was never meant to come to this."

"I know it wasn't, Mr. Graham," Pazzi assures him. "I have a good instinct about people, and a good feeling about you. I need your help."

"*My* help?" Will balks, uncertain.

"To get to *Destabilize*," Pazzi affirms, counting money onto the table for his bill - and a large tip - before standing to lead them out.

-

Chapter End Notes

-Beta'd by the patient (and sometimes put upon) Quedarius, whom I owe many breakfasts.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Pazzi seems to have accepted Will's silence as processing time - or perhaps as an affirmation of something Will had no choice but to agree to. He turns with keys in hand, regarding Will slyly as he does his best to make his tired mind align the two concepts it was trying to reconcile into a sensible question.

"Detective," Will asks, "you said you couldn't verify that my Hannibal was scrapped..."

The rest of the question seems difficult, harder than it should be to align. Will finally must face it, "was it the one used to detonate the bomb at City Hall?"

Will cannot get his mind around it. His help? He's quite certain that he's already helped more than enough - putting a bomb into the hands of a terrorist group, antagonizing Verger without keeping even what was left of Hannibal.

Something occurs to him, and Will stops dead in the parking lot.

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"Mr. Graham, I was wondering if you'd ask or let it keep you up all night again," Detective Pazzi says, smiling - his expressions are genuine and somehow sincere, even when Will is set against trusting him. There is a strange, conspiratorial attitude about him. Will thinks again of the scars on his wrists, but then Pazzi is answering his question.

"We have only a partial individual identification number recovered from the scene, which I cannot reveal to you while the case is still open," Pazzi says. He clicks a button on the key fob for his unmarked patrol car - Will had seen the controls for the light in the dash, the mount for a Glass interface, even an old CB radio in the vehicle. It chirps, flashing its headlights and unlocking.

Will makes to get into the back, and Pazzi motions him toward the front. The simple gesture reassures Will, as he supposes it's meant to. Now that they are not immediate adversaries, Pazzi wants to build rapport.

"What I *can* tell you," Pazzi continues, sliding in behind the wheel, "is that at the current juncture, your Hannibal model is not a suspect."

Will feels as if a weight has been lifted from his chest, though it still leaves him with questions. It's torture, knowing and not knowing. He has spent two years certain that Hannibal was gone - had thought it behind him. The decision had been *Hannibal's*, after all. Will had never had time to entertain any notions of repair or restoration. It would have become a question of deeper morals.

"I'll take you home, Mr. Graham. You can think about my offer," Pazzi pulls the car back out onto the street smoothly, heading for Will's apartment.

Will has no idea what to think of the offer - he is not entirely certain it will stay an 'offer' if he should try to refuse it. He is too tired to make any decision on the matter now, so he takes the chance he's given to think about it to heart.

"I hope you decide to work with us," Pazzi confides, pulling up outside Will's apartment. "I think you'd like Tig, if you met him."

Will thinks of how many androids he has 'liked' since the loss of Hannibal. He finds it unlikely that 'Tig' will break the streak, but he is polite enough not to bring it up. Instead, he trudges upstairs to see to his dog and the android to which he is already obligated.

He collects the mail in some semblance of routine, though he is too exhausted to sort it. The lack of a flat surface where he usually dropped his mail unnerves Will. He steps further into the apartment and, seeing no better option, he drops the unopened letters - bills mostly - into the lap of the inert Napoleon. It is about as much assistance as he wants from the android at the moment.

Winston moves between Will and the door in an anxious, unceasing circle until Will takes the cue and brings the dog down to relieve himself.

Standing outside with cool fall air touching the nape of his neck, the sun catching one spot of heat on the crown of his head in contrast, Will finds the last few days difficult to believe. He feels detached and adrift, set apart from everything. His thoughts are very small and quiet, a tiny paper boat on a calm sea. Precarious.

Will Graham takes himself upstairs and sleeps, dark and deep. It is almost dreamless, except his tired mind drags up one perfect memory; the sound of Hannibal's voice, calling him from the kitchen. Will startles awake, his body answering an unreal stimulus that it had created on its own. It is the late evening when he steps into his kitchen, answering the call of his memory even knowing it's not real.

He is finally hungry. He feeds Winston, and then gets to work on his own dinner. The fridge is very bare, he will have to shop soon, but Will finds a can of tuna and bread crumbs enough to make patties. It's calming work, mixing and shaping, tending them while they fry golden brown in the pan.

When his dinner is done and arranged on a plate - Hannibal would have insisted on vegetables, but Will thinks protein is going to better serve him - he carries it out to the living room. Winston pays careful attention to his plate until Will scolds him to go and lay down.

With the plate balanced on his lap, he settles on the floor at Napoleon's side, tilting the android forward in order to access the programming panels at the back of his neck. The synthskin pulls back, revealing a transparent containment box that protects and conceals the series of programming chips.

Will pries up the tension clips on the plastic door. The Napoleon has a more complex central processing unit than Hannibal units had. It's a joined cluster of individual processing units assigned to cooperatively manage different functions. It isn't unlike a human brain, though it requires a sort of - traffic flow regulation.

Napoleons have a priorital hindbrain that manage and structure which processes and activities take precedence in specific situations. Will leaves that chip in place, instead pulling the ones dedicated to fine motor control and personality.

"Let's see what we can do to make you more likeable," Will says, though the android is powered down. He stuffs the first bite of his dinner in his mouth and balances the plate in one hand, the chips in the other to head for his work bench.

He's too hungry to finish the job before he eats and too in need of distraction to eat without working. He risks crumbs and oils, but the chips are not as delicate as the circuitry on Napoleon's inner working.

It's just programming work. He interfaces the chips with his Glass, and spreads the array across the surface of his work bench. It is enough to occupy his mind, to keep his thoughts from retreating into the endless questions and considerations that have been troubling him.

The coding is masterful, but Will can see places where the original hand was restrained. He finds jagged holes carved in the personality coding that call out to unimplemented or missing motor control code. The Napoleons are on the verge of old and new - and it seems they had lost a lot when the popular trend had changed from realism to safe, bland imitation.

Will wonders if he can restore what was lost, if the Napoleon would seem more natural with the coding his programmers had intended him to have. Curious, he checks the darknet to see if a copy of the original programming is available. He finds the leak, and smiles to himself - no programmer worth their salt would stand by and watch their code get hacked up without keeping a backup.

He is halfway through downloading the file when he stops to wonder if he *should* restore the programming. He chews the last bites of his dinner, turning his chair on its swivel to look at Napoleon's inert form. There is still discarded mail in its lap.

Will feels fairly certain that no amount of humanity will cause him to become overly attached to it. It is, in fact, an excuse not to power the android up for several more hours. Will sets the files to backup and restore, then carries his plate into the kitchen to wash it.

He is elbow deep in dishwater when his troubles creep back in.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

When his phone rings the next day, Will has his fingers tangled into the depths of Napoleon's servo-drive motor for his expressions. The android is laid out on its front on the floor, open from the back of its head down the entire torso to the tail end of its steel spine.

Will has given in to his urge to dig his hands all the way into the internals and get the full understanding of what he's modifying beyond the programming.

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Will has given in to his urge to dig his hands all the way into the internals and get the full understanding of what he's modifying beyond the programming.

He yanks his glass off the floor and smears yellowish motor-oil over it when he makes the gesture to answer the call. It goes sticky and slick against Will's ear, and tries to slide out from between his cheek and shoulder where he braces it so he can keep working.

"This is Will Graham," he answers, wondering if he should have checked who was calling.

"Will," the voice and enthusiasm belong to Jack Crawford. Will hasn't heard from the Crawfords in a while. Their Caesar pair are aging past the typical assistive android lifespan by this point, Will realizes. It is a solemn thought.

"Hello, Mr. Crawford. How are you doing?" Will does his best to sound conversational, as he works to loosen over-tightened springs, hopefully increasing the fluidity of Napoleon's expressions.

"We've been well, and very happy with all the modifications made to our Caesar units," Jack answers, bridging them out of casual conversation as quickly as possible. Will appreciates it. He always deals best with Jack in the business sense.

"Has everything held up alright?" Will believes it should have, he always does work to last. Still, when something went out into the world, there were infinite possibilities.

"Oh sure," Jack agrees, as if he hadn't thought about it. His mind is somewhere else, Will realizes. The phone slides down against his shoulder a little more and Will leans on it harder. "They lasted as long as the androids themselves did."

Will stops, listening. Jack didn't call to antagonize him with the reminder that androids had finite lifespans. It shouldn't matter anyway, the Caesars were not nearly as sophisticated in personality as they were in housework.

"We upgraded when they exceeded the manufacturer's recommended lifespan," Jack tells him. It is not uncommon - they could be returned to the manufacturer to be refurbished and resold, and the owners earned a credit toward the purchase of upgraded models. Will cannot fault the logic of treating them like used cars, when that is essentially what they are to the Crawfords.

"What model did you choose to upgrade to?" Will tries to sound positive, even if he can't quite manage enthusiasm. It means a steady stream of work for him, at least. As busy as he feels, none of his current projects are paid.

"Well, Bella wanted to go all the way to Tamerlane," Jack begins.

"Smart," Will answers, working grease into a dried joint. Sitting in its packing crate for so long has not done Napoleon many favors. "Means you can go longer before they're outdated, and you won't have to upgrade again too soon."

"Have you been speaking to her?" Jack chuckles.

"Well, no," Will says. It's common sense, it's just not the way *he* works. "What did you pick?"

"We haven't yet," Jack admits.

Will finishes his work and re-balances the phone against his ear - his neck is beginning to ache.

"I was just calling ahead to let you know we'll need your services again soon," Jack continues, "and to ask about your recommendation."

"Uh," Will says, stalling for time to consider. He grabs a rag to scrub at his greasy fingers. "You know, honestly I've kept abreast of Caesars, Alexanders, and Napoleon models, but not the newest stuff. Usually people wait for the conditional warranty to expire before cracking the seal."

"Usually people don't have such a great relationship with their mechanics," Jack says, buttering Will up.

"Well, I think Bella has a point about investing in the top of the line, since you plan to further invest in customization," Will offers. "No sense in risking remorse that you didn't take the plunge later on."

"I thought you'd say that. Well, usually she gets her way anyway, and I've never regretted it," Jack sighs, but the tone is affectionate. "I'll get back in touch with you once we have the new AA's delivered."

"Thanks, Mr. Crawford," Will answers. He does appreciate the loyalty, if not their cavalier attitude about machines.

"You can call me Jack," the voice is amused. "I feel like a school teacher when you call me 'Mr. Crawford.'"

Will manages the appropriate chuckle and affirms the change before they exchange goodbyes. He wipes the Glass free of oil with the same rag he'd used on his hands before he sets it aside to finish working.

The mention of new models starts Will's thoughts going as he fits everything back into place. He is aware of the newest models, but the Tamerlanes are only four months off the production line. Though they were meant to replace the now aging Caesars, they had hardly started to circulate and become wide-spread. Will has never seen one.

He supposes they will be as carefully uninteresting and non-threatening as Napoleon, at least out of the box. The difference would be that with the trend firmly in place, there would not even be the rudimentary remains of vestigial code to be coaxed back as Will is doing currently with his Napoleon.

It would be designed from the ground up to be totally bland and safe. Will is not sure if that should qualify as advancement. He wonders how many other people had seen the older models as too much - how many felt about their androids as he did, even if not to the extent he had about Hannibal. He wonders if the changes have come about not because people felt threatened by the humanity in the androids, but too attached to replace them as often as the times required.

Too, it makes him wonder about another model he has no experience with - the prototype, Tigranes. Pazzi called the android his partner and seemed at least to be trying to coax Will out onto common ground. He cannot guess to what purpose. Perhaps simply so Pazzi would not feel quite so alone in his appreciation of androids as individuals.

Or, Will allows, it is all bullshit. A cop trick to build rapport and get in close to Will to see if he'll slip up. He isn't sure if knowing that means he should pursue the avenue that will bring him into the investigation, to get as much as he can out of it and try to establish his innocence. More likely, it means he should avoid any involvement altogether.

Except for one thing - while Will might stay out of it and hope that no solid ties would prove his involvement with the case, Mason Verger has several very solid, very physical pieces of Will's property.

He sighs out, sharply, re-attaching the construction panels onto Napoleon's back with the disturbing crunch sounds of plastic pressure tabs snapping back into place. The eyes were on Mason for *Destabilize*. If Freddie knew, then so did the police - or at least they suspected. That meant eyes were on Verger, he was a target and if he was taken down they would find Will's property in a very incriminating place.

So, he decides - finally slotting the restored personality and fine motor control chips back into place - it's best to come clean. *Damned if you do and damned if you don't.* He had, after all, been responsible for his own actions. Even if he hasn't put the bomb directly into the hands of *Destabilize*, his intent had been no more honorable.

He has always known that his desperation would be punished. Will thought Hannibal had saved him from it - he had certainly *tried* - but Will has not managed to uphold Hannibal's - his *friend's* - good work.

It is time to face up to it. If Pazzi's intentions are as good as face value, Will might make up for his misdeeds and get off with a lighter conscience - if not a lighter sentence. He realizes, suddenly, that his design places Pazzi's partner in direct danger.

Perhaps seeking Will's help was, in part, trying to protect Tigranes. He doubts the government or police bomb squad would be sympathetic. They would risk the android first, to be certain the bomb was efficiently android-proof. It was the point, after all, to reduce risk to humans and keep lives safe.

Will wonders how long it will be before robots are made ineffective by the natural reaction of technology. When use becomes widespread - if it is effective - surely people other than Will will work to foil that method of disarmament.

Well, as long as he can delay the risk to android existence and human life, Will thinks he should. He discards the old clothes from his closet that Napoleon had looked so strange in and then hefts the bag from the consignment store, hoping that he has properly estimated Napoleon's size. The robot is not quite portly, but thicker in the waist - the designers had used the extra space in the chest cavity to house more memory and processing capacity.

He activates the power switch on the back of Napoleon's neck, waking the android after three days of sleep and changes. Will doesn't let himself linger too long on thoughts of barely knowing the android before practically rebuilding it.

"Good morning," Napoleon says to the carpet.

Will chuckles.

"Have you finished your adjustments?" the tone is polite - slightly different than Will remembers, though in the same pitch and cultured cadence. There is a faint raspy quality, lending a depth to its voice that Will can see why they edited. He likes it - it creates the illusion that the android is speaking from his chest rather than emulating a voice from a speaker.

"Yes Napoleon," Will says, "please get up."

The android does, with no shame for its nakedness. It is of course sexless, bland and featureless to the extent of lacking even nipples, though the skin that might commonly be seen is beautifully variated and detailed.

Will passes the bag to Napoleon, who looks at it with ice-chip blue eyes. The expression changes slowly, fluidly into understanding as Napoleon processes the contents and what Will must expect it to do with them.

"Thank you," Napoleon says, gracious as it accepts the bag. The motion is fluid and the smile offered has none of the disturbing stiffness that had plagued it earlier.

Will leaves Napoleon to get dressed, picking his Glass up off the floor again and scrolling through his contacts for Detective Pazzi's number.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Will takes the bus back to the diner, wondering how often Pazzi eats there. It is not in proximity to the police station, and that might be part of the reason for the choice. Or maybe it was home territory for him, a comforting advantage. Maybe, Will allows, he really likes eggs benedict.

Pazzi flags Will down as he crosses the parking lot. Today, he is wearing a light gray suit and it looks rumpled from sitting in his unmarked car. Will notices he is not wearing a tie, but at the collar of his shirt a thin cord joins behind some sort of pendant, trailing two silver-tipped ends down his chest. A bolo. It makes his neck look bigger.

As he gets closer, Will can see that the pendant features a cartoon Elvis, enthusiastically pushing his hips out and giving the thumbs up.

"So," Will says, repulsed and intrigued in equal measures. "You uh, you like Elvis?"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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"So," Will says, repulsed and intrigued in equal measures. "You uh, you like Elvis?"

"No," Pazzi answers, with a straight face and no hesitation. He moves past Will with a look that makes him feel like the question was strange, and pulls open the door of the diner to let them in.

Inside is quieter than Will remembers it last time. He supposes the breakfast rush is past. The same waitress greets them when Pazzi enters. Macy, Will remembers. She is probably as

much of a regular as Pazzi is. He lifts a hand in greeting and she pauses on her rounds with the coffee pot.

"Your table's free, Rey," she says and smiles. Genuine again.

"Mind if we go in back? I'd like to introduce my friend to the cook," Pazzi asks, though it seems strange. Will gets the impression that Pazzi *himself* is a little strange overall. Humoring his eccentricities has served Will to this point, however. He sees no harm in continuing it.

Macy considers with a glance around the quiet dining room. "Sure, just don't tie him up too long."

"You have my word," Pazzi promises, leading them back through the dining room for the swing-hinged door for into the kitchen. Will gets a little thrill out of passing through the door marked 'staff only' behind Pazzi.

The inside smells like frying bacon and fluffed pancakes, only deeper and older. Like the scent has lived there for decades and has had time to sink down into the very bones of the place, without becoming rancid or unpleasant. It reminds Will of his childhood, when diners had been more common. He remembers Sundays fishing with his dad, having a late breakfast afterward on the way home. Will does not sink down too deep in those memories.

There are several cooks in the kitchen - line chefs, Will thinks. Pazzi is scanning the room for one particular white, shabby suit. The chefs are clean, but dingy. Too often washed. It's honest, somehow. Fitting. Will follows Pazzi's gaze.

At the back of the kitchen a big metal door opens - a walk-in cooler or freezer.

Hannibal steps out.

"Tig!" Pazzi calls, and Will registers the sound but not the word or its bearing on the sequence of events that follows.

Hannibal, carrying effortlessly a crate that must weigh sixty pounds, turns toward them. His eyes are dark and *right*; soft ruddy brown. He smiles. The motion is the same slow, considered thing. Will is looking at him, he is looking at Will, and all the air and light and noise has vanished from the room. Hannibal is a ghost to his eyes, only one with color and solidity, and he feels certain at any moment the spirit will disappear.

"Rey!" Hannibal answers.

The ghost vanishes. Will sucks in warm, pancake flavored air.

The voice is not the same, no cultured European tone or depth. It is rough and harsh at points, but un-accented. The hands supporting the crate of kitchen supplies are also unfamiliar. At first, Will thinks Hannibal is wearing some sort of gauntlets. Then he realizes that no soft, easily damaged synthskin covers the hands - instead, they are outfitted with tough, articulated metal plates.

The previous exchange finally penetrates Will's numbed mind. This is the prototype, Tig. He does not know what else he expected - the government had no need to model and build a new face for a bomb disposal prototype. The carriage they had ransacked for hand design had one already that was good enough to serve for interfacing purposes.

Tig moves again, finishing his trip with the box, which he begins to unload at various prep stations - re-stocking supplies at empty areas and for the other chefs. Will realizes he is also wearing whites.

"Did you want to complain about breakfast?" Tig asks, idly, without pausing in his efforts while he makes conversation. "I'm afraid I didn't make it. You'll have to bring it up with Jackson."

"*This* is the chef you wanted me to meet?" Will cannot help the disbelief in his tone, at the situation.

Tig looks at him for the first time, hesitating as he studies Will. His hair is looser, messier, sliding over his eyes in a handsome way Hannibal had never allowed. He smiles again - flawless, winning.

"Why not?" Tig asks him, a challenge rather than a curiosity. "After all, I'm constructed from a model intended to serve as an assistant in cooking for a household."

"Tig," Pazzi interrupts, reminding Will of his presence - and briefly, irritatingly - of his complicity in this surprise. "This is Will Graham."

Tig studies Will again, memorizing him. The android will not forget his face. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Graham."

"Pleased to meet you too, Tigranes," Will answers politely. He is not entirely sure that he *is*. Will feels at once compelled and repulsed. He thinks, helplessly, of old movies like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. It is not a fair comparison.

"I'm sorry, Tigranes, Detective Pazzi said you were both assigned to the bomb squad. It thought you would also be..." Will shrugs, realizing he had just *assumed*, though Pazzi had partially led him to the conclusion by using 'partner'.

"Androids are not allowed to hold official positions in public service," Tig explains calmly, without irritation or offense. "I am contracted by the bomb squad when it is assembled-"

Pazzi mutters, "as *equipment*," low, but Will hears it. Hears all the offended irritation in it.

"-but like my partner, I sought a full time job in the downtime."

Tig rolls his shoulders, depositing a carton of eggs into a cold cooler beneath a workstation. The insides are immaculate, Will notices, everything aligned perfectly and conveniently in reach of the cook at the station above it.

"The work helps exercise and improve my social and manual dexterities," Tig concludes, un-coached and wondrous. Will is charmed, captivated by the ability - seeming or genuine -for

self understanding.

Pazzi moves forward, smiling like a proud father, to clap Tig affectionately on the shoulder. Will is not certain what to say. What he *can* say. He isn't sure how he is supposed to react though clearly he is meant to have a reaction.

"It's still the middle of my shift," Tig reminds, hoisting the empty supply crate to return it to a vacant spot on the floor by the door he had exited. He dusts his strange metallic hands then, once. It is a gesture that is human, performed with an inhuman precision that seems to suit him.

"And I haven't come to steal you away-"

"Order up!" Macy's voice interjects, and she appears at the order counter tapping in a few keys and placing her order tablet down against the interfacing panel to transfer the recorded order into the kitchen system. Lights begin to flash above the various workstations and Tig reaches up to press a button over an empty station to take the order in.

"Just to make an introduction," Pazzi continues.

Tig washes his hands, waiting for the rest. His eyes are on the screen above his workstation in order to process the order he has taken on. He reaches into the prep cooler beneath the station to fetch the ingredients for someone's breakfast. Will watches, entranced.

"Well," Tig observes, his tone bland but not dismissive. "We're introduced. The rest will have to wait."

He glances up and offers a smile to Will to soften his put upon tone as he turns on the station cook surface and begins cracking eggs to scramble. The nuances of the interplay - the implication of past interactions - are not lost on Will

"I suppose," Pazzi chuckles, turning to Will like a co-conspirator, "that means he's busy. Let's go get breakfast."

Will follows the gentle, guiding hand laid against his shoulder.

"Make sure *you* take our order," Pazzi calls back.

"Are you trying to poison our new friend already?" Tig answers, his tone a perfect copy of amusement. Will allows himself to be led stricken and silent from the kitchen.

Pazzi guides him to a table, empty. Will sits automatically. Pazzi gives him an affectionate pat on the shoulder, steadying, and steps away.

"Was yours anything like that?" Pazzi asks, sitting across the table from him.

Macy sweeps in with two coffee cups and fills them, leaving the carafe as before. She prepares her notepad, waiting for their order.

"Is your friend hungry today?" she asks, smiling at Will to show she doesn't mean any malice. "Should I wait for you to see the menu, honey?"

With her eyes on him, Will registers that she looks a little concerned. He must look like a gasping fish - pale and shocked, breathless. Drowning on land. He gathers his thoughts, summoning an answering smile.

"I'll have what he's having," Will manages.

"And you won't regret it," Pazzi promises. "But you can hold our orders until Tig is free, please, Macy?"

She smiles, making a note. "Gonna be a long talk, huh?"

"Most likely," Pazzi agrees. Macy smiles and goes to collect another carafe, filling cups on her way back to check on her orders.

Will takes a deep breath and reaches for his coffee cup as Pazzi stirs cream and sugar into his own.

"Hard to believe how stupid he was," Pazzi says, but the tone is of fond remembrance. "It's clear he got smart around soldiers, though."

"How different is Tig from - from the original unit?" Will stumbles over generalizing. When he says 'Hannibal', he means one in specific, and Tig has already proven himself sufficiently unique from that one.

Pazzi looks at him quizzically over his coffee cup. Will can see the ugly cartoon Elvis peering at him with sunglass-clad eyes over the top of Pazzi's mug. Somehow, it's normal enough to help Will's thoughts start to find coherence again.

"I mean," Will says, and then hesitates. He isn't sure how polite this is, to ask Pazzi about the internal workings of something - *someone* - that Pazzi considers a friend. Pazzi doesn't look like he's expecting to be upset by the question.

"Internally, how different is the hardware?" Will finishes his question.

"Well," Pazzi starts, orienting his coffee cup just so on the table top. "The mechanical aspects are mostly the same, and you can see that they didn't bother to dress him any different. The rest is all new, all developed for Tig. He's one of a kind."

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Chapter End Notes

-This chapter, and the next, Beta'd by my faithful constant Quedarius (http://archiveofourown.org/users/Quedarius/pseuds/Quedarius) , who worked through rain and sleet and fog and snow (or somesuch) to help me bring you this chapter & the next as a special double update.

-Q also helped provide the idea for Pazzi's ugly tie of the week, which is inspired by a recent life experience and just kind of ran away with me. I promise he doesn't have quite so little fashion sense as he seems to.

-Tigranes, in case I haven't mentioned it before, is a reference to Tigranes the Great who is a fascinating character himself.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Will Graham slides into the passenger side of Pazzi's car again, settling uncertainly.

"Are you sure you don't-?" he starts to ask Tig as the android eases into the back seat. The car's stance changes noticeably in relation to the ground, back end sinking on the shocks.

"For traction," Pazzi says, easing in behind the wheel, "Tig sits in back."

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"For traction," Pazzi says, easing in behind the wheel, "Tig sits in back."

He stops with the keys in his hand, turning to look back over the front bench seat into the back. He hooks an arm over, and it twists him close enough to Will that he can smell the detective's cologne and study the pattern on his tie closely enough to make sense of the vibrant, clashing colors.

"Tig, are you cool with this?" Pazzi asks, and Will feels suddenly intrusive, though he is curious about the answer.

Tig has exchanged his chef whites for a half-decent suit that looks less worn than his partner's. He considers the question.

"I'll have backup," Tig answers with a passing shrug, a perfect uncertain smile. "We're not going for any reason that should worry me."

Pazzi takes a deep breath and twists his mouth to one side as he studies Tig. He looks ready to argue, if he detects any sign of falseness in Tig. The android answers with a look of steely reserve that seems to convince Pazzi otherwise. He works his tongue over his lower lip and points, as if marking his partner's words or a point in Tig's favor.

Will does his seat-belt to hide his smile, making a show of looking out the window until they are moving. Pazzi eases the car onto the street. It's going to be a long drive - out of the city. Will hunts for a topic of small talk, eager to fill the silence and to hear more from Tig. His

mind jumps back to the winged golf-ball pattern he had recognized on Pazzi's tie. Priding himself in recognizing a theme, Will glances at Pazzi.

"So- uh, you like golf?" Will asks.

Pazzi's eyebrows draw in and he looks at Will with bland confusion. "No."

Will is baffled. He cannot fathom the code in the hideous ties. Will catches himself with his mouth open but no way to politely ask the question.

"Your tie," Tig says, raising his voice over the road sounds.

Pazzi glances down at the tie, currently following the curve of his belly. "Is *that* what those are?"

Will laughs. "Yes, and you had one with Daffy Duck."

Pazzi makes another face. "*Tig* likes golf."

"You taught me to play," Tig answers.

"I didn't teach you to play better than I do," Pazzi sighs, tossing a dirty look at Tig in the rear-view mirror.

"Inanimate objects play better than you do," Tig observes.

"*Animate* objects sure as hell do," Pazzi retorts, without real malice.

Will hadn't meant to start an argument - even if this one has little heat and the interplay is fantastic. "I just thought since you wore the ties-"

"That I had absolutely no taste," Pazzi finishes, blandly.

"-that you might be interested," Will continues, smiling in the face of the hound-dog look on Pazzi's features.

"Tell him about the ties, Tig."

Will looks back at Tigranes, interested in the explanation. Tig turns his dark eyes toward Will and has the audacity to wink.

"I was taught that gifts were supposed to be useful and make the person who got them think of who they got them from," Tig explains. "*I* like golf, and he wears ties on the job."

Tig pauses and flicks his attention directly at Will - for a moment, there is a clear and absolute mischief in his expression that vanishes instantly when Pazzi glances back. Sudden understanding touches Will - the ties are a prank, a joke played on Pazzi to see how far he would take it, how long Pazzi would go on wearing them. How long he would believe that Tig really did not know any better. He falls silent, shocked.

"Well I can't forget you when I look in the mirror," Pazzi answers, but Will notices he does not insult or reject the ties outright.

"You must like Daffy Duck, too," Will observes.

Tig smiles. Either he truly enjoys the cartoon icon, or he enjoys watching his partner endure it. Will suspects he is exploring and learning his own concept of loyalty by testing and watching Pazzi's.

He wonders, too, if Pazzi *knows*. The detective, while expressive, can also play his cards close to his chest, Will knows. The relationship is surprisingly complex.

Will sits back with an unexpected ache in his chest. Tig is more than Hannibal could have been, yet he sees the echoes of potential come to fruition and wonders how it had happened. If the same spark found and fanned by Pazzi - and perhaps even other soldiers to a lesser extent - had unfolded. If it could unfold again.

Probably not in the more modern androids. Even restored, Napoleon was smooth but not organic. Smart but not intelligent. When he sees Tig, he thinks that it is not by accident that the new models of android are so sterile.

"Tigranes," he asks carefully, "why did they recall the Hannibal models when it's clear you're so different?"

Tig is silent for a moment, and Pazzi doesn't immediately jump to his rescue though Will can see he *wants* to. He wonders why.

"Though my hands and processing methods are different," The tone is flat, wrote, "many of my other mechanics are the same. To ensure longevity and effectiveness, efforts had to be made to thwart reverse engineering."

Will does not argue. It borders on a lie, shocking enough, but also seems to be misdirection for self protection.

"Do you hold it against me?" Tig asks into the silence that follows.

Will's heart starts pounding. "What?"

"My partner says you had a Hannibal unit that was recalled. That's what we're investigating," Tig explains and reminds, causing Will's stomach to sink a little.

"Do you hold the recall against me?" Tig finishes, repeating for clarity.

Will hasn't considered it. He answers as honestly as he can. "Tigranes, I only knew you as a vague concept before yesterday."

Tig only had a small role in deciding the recall - simply existing. The rest of the decision had been up to others, and even they could not really be blamed for putting one man's feelings about outdated technology before something that could save lives.

"I don't think I blame anyone for the recall," Will says, "I was just upset I couldn't stop it."

Tigranes considers the answer. It keeps him quiet for a while. Will watches the city recede around them, and tries not to feel their destination becoming more real in his mind. For a time, just on the edge of the city,the houses get bigger, cleaner. Signs of poverty vanish entirely only to return in force as they pass beyond the zones reclaimed by gentrification.

Here, the houses look exhausted and leaning, brown and dark with grime and soot. No one appears outside, cars crouch in driveways in various states of rusting death or the houses appear empty, the occupants working in the city.

Suddenly he doesn't want to watch the world anymore. Will decides to give small talk another shot, this time with the member of the partnership that seems warmer toward the concept.

He turns in his seat as much as the belt will allow, "So, uh. You like Elvis?"

Pazzi makes a noise in his chest like the air being let out of a tire, a sound of prolonged misery.

Tig smiles beatifically, meeting Will's gaze. "I'm not allowed to talk about it."

Will can't help laughing. Pazzi takes a turn off the highway and pulls into a dusty parking lot. Will's mood sinks back down immediately. The attendant building is more a warehouse, dusty blue colored and with only small windows.

Robotic Recycling and Technology Reclamation. Will tries not to picture the inside but images created long ago by Freddie and her gleeful descriptions of dismememberment stir in the back of Will's mind.

He feels the car shift as Tigranes gets out, and he follows. Pazzi had invited Will along as a matter of courtesy, pursuing an item of curiosity to them both, turned up by his investigation. Though Will's Hannibal had been cleared of guilt, a Hannibal unit had still been used in the bombing.

It was time to find out just how many had come up missing. Will can face whatever is inside to know more. Pazzi digs his notebook out of the glove compartment, a battered and stolen hotel pen, and a slim leather envelope that Will suspects is reader glasses. He tucks them all into the inner breast pocket of his suit coat.

They head for the front door, passing a security station with a brief introduction. Will closes his eyes when the door swings open, expecting a horrorshow - fires powering an old fashioned forge, a slag pit, an inferno in which car crushers mashed human forms into little cubes perhaps.

Instead, the tame white sterility of a reception room greets him. It leaves him feeling underwhelmed, lulled toward false security. It is an interface between casual visitors and the horrors wrought on human shapes beyond.

"Good morning Mrs. DuMaurier," Pazzi reads the name off the outdated wood and bronze plaque on the desk. "I believe we spoke earlier?"

She is blonde and perfect - well manicured and made-up and styled. She looks up from entering information on the data screen with sharp, attentive eyes. They hold a vast ocean of guarded disinterest between them and herself. Her voice is dry and smoky but still feminine and smooth.

"You must be Detective Pazzi," she says, and her tone never quite rises to warmth. Her eyes sweep over Will, and then land on Tigranes and stop.

"What's your individual identification number?" She demands, displeased to see him. Likely she expects some correlation to Pazzi's earlier line of questioning.

"Mrs. DuMaurier, this is my *partner*, Tigranes. You'll find him unable to answer your question, as you have just asked for classified information," Pazzi does come to Tig's aid here, Will notices. He had let the android face all the difficult questions from Will without interference but would not suffer anything that seemed like a direct threat.

Will's respect for him grows, his like for the detective pushing past the guarded reserve he had been trying to hold on to.

"He looks just like-" DuMaurier starts, but then she decides better of it. She dismisses her own interest with a toss of her hair and rises confidently to her feet in a pair of high heels that leave her the tallest in the room. "Well, never mind. Detective Pazzi, I'm not sure what you're after, exactly."

"I'd like a look at your records for the disposal of recalled units," Pazzi reminds.

She sighs and the gesture sees a lot of use, Will thinks. It rolls through her like a thunderstorm, but leaves her resolved afterward. Ready for whatever tiresome, idiotic questions she is about to endure. Mrs. DuMaurier gathers a key ring from a drawer on her desk and heads down a short corridor toward a pair of double doors.

"Come with me."

-

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

They pass through the double doors and out onto the warehouse floor. It smells like sterilizing chemicals and melting plastic, and it only takes one deep breath for Will to start to feeling a deep *wrongness*, to feel as if this place is sliding fingers into his seams.

"As you can see," Mrs. DuMaurier explains, pointing something out that Will does not look at. "We immediately process the robots we receive. They are mostly recycled, but any parts that might contain personal information are destroyed in accordance with regulations."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Pazzi makes a note and Tigranes remains silent. Will becomes aware of a low-level hum, like a pulse or a slow electric current. It grates on him, easing into his awareness and refusing to leave.

"You said several other pieces of paperwork had gone missing?" Pazzi asks.

"We had an issue with an employee who didn't believe in the importance of filing it correctly," DuMaurier corrects him. "The paperwork isn't missing, it was simply never filed."

Another note. They arrive at another door and Will hopes that what's behind it is only filing cabinets.

In the pause, Pazzi produces a pair of thin, wire-framed glasses and puts them on, squinting at his older notes. "You said that employee - Matthew Brown - no longer works here?"

"You seem to have an excellent memory for things I've already said, detective," DuMaurier says, faintly irritated.

"I'm sorry Mrs. DuMaurier," Pazzi says sincerely. "I have several cases on my plate at any given moment and it's helpful to not only verify but remind myself of the facts before I see

new evidence."

She holds the door handle. Will glances up from the floor, becoming aware of the vast space around them.

"Evidence of-?" She asks, cold.

Will is aware then, that white suited workers move along a dissembly line, working in perfect, practiced unison. The hum he hears is a central power compressor, working their tools.

He slams his gaze back to the floor and suddenly becomes aware of Tigranes next to him. The android is looking, watching with dead, blank eyes. His hand comes up as if of its own accord then, and the cool metal surface brushes reassuringly against the back of Will's, as if sensing and sharing his discomfort.

Pazzi glances back at them, and then gestures for Mrs. DuMaurier to let them into what Will hopes is the record room.

"Mrs. DuMaurier," he explains as she unlocks the door and holds it open, following her in. "You know about the recent bombing of City Hall, and that a Hannibal unit was involved. We're looking for where that unit came from, when the recall was reported as complete."

DuMaurier makes a face. Will follows her and Pazzi into the file room - and that is clearly the intent. Labeled file cabinets are dated by year, drawers displaying months in impeccable order. Contrasting this aura of control, boxes filled to overflowing with android parts sit on top of the cabinets - they are dripping synthskin or protruding hands, limbs, motors.

Individually, he has seen the pieces hundreds of times, but never cast aside carelessly in bulk. It should seem sterile and impersonal, like boxes of old silicone motherboards, keyboards and mice, the 21st century had chewed through and spit out in rapid succession.

"I confirmed that the serial number you were asking about was received," DuMaurier says, heading for a cabinet labeled four years prior to pull open the drawer for the last quarter.

"Mrs. DuMaurier, you didn't personally see the unit we spoke about go through the recycling and reclamation process?"

"No," she says, pulling a file out of a tabbed section marked 'Hannibal' - it is the largest section in that drawer. "We process hundreds of units a day, sometimes nearly a thousand, Detective. It's not my job - or anyone's - to personally oversee any individual android go down the line. Do you expect the garbage and recycling facilities to watch every banana peel?"

"A banana peel didn't carry a bomb into City Hall," Tigranes observes. DuMaurier turns a steely look onto the android, though his tone had been admirably neutral for someone who had just been compared to compost. He displays his metallic hands in a placating gesture.

"No one expects you to monitor the process from start to finish, Ma'am," Pazzi soothes. He tosses a glance over the rims of his glasses to Tig, suggesting more discretion is in order. "I'm following a lead, trying to determine the source this android originated from, hoping to track it forward from a starting point. There are steps between origin and destination I'm very interested in."

DuMaurier looks at him skeptically, and then Will realizes the source of her reluctance. She does not want any responsibility to fall on her. She is, in a very human and selfish way, frightened. Afraid that her mistake - something uncharacteristic with the way she seems to radiate control - will come back to hurt other people.

She passes the file to Pazzi, who opens the manilla folder to look over the single form inside. Will realizes he is holding *Hannibal's* file, *his* Hannibal.

"Was this the only Hannibal model to go missing - excuse me - for which the there was inadequate paperwork?" Pazzi asks. Over his shoulder, Will can see a square, color photograph. He stretches up on his toes and sees that it is a composite image of Hannibal - both in the complete, laid out bare and displaying the entire body flat, as well as up close.

The photo of his face looks like it came from a morgue - eyes open but blank, features slack. Will looks, trying to be sure, though he doesn't know the mechanism by which he *could* be.

"No, there were several others - and a variety of other models and non-android reclamations," DuMaurier explains. "The employee in question worked here for six months - coincidentally, a time during which we had a much higher intake of Hannibal units due to the recall."

"I understand," Pazzi makes another note, then copies several metrics and annotations from the file in his hands. "May I see any other Hannibal units with incomplete paperwork?"

DuMaurier gives Pazzi a look that suggests she finds his one-track mind tiring, and he answers only with raised eyebrows and a charming smile. Will watches her eyes rake over his ugly tie before she finally surrenders. She pokes through the Hannibal division and passes several more thin file folders to Pazzi.

Each contains just the same single form - What Will guesses to be an intake form - with pictures of the androids in the condition they were received. After the fifth such file Pazzi hesitates, looking a little closer at a unit Will can't tell from the rest. DuMaurier pulls a sixth and seventh file.

"These were only partial units, turned in by repair shops that had cannibalized them for parts," she says. "I'm not sure if you'd like them, too."

Pazzi closes the file he had been considering. "Can we get copies of these?"

DuMaurier seems about to resist, but she takes Pazzi's measure and supposes it would only be a delay in compliance while he came up with a warrant. She nods and takes the files back, moving toward a copier that Will hadn't previously noticed. She moves a box of severed arms off of it, revealing a dusty surface.

"Mrs. DuMaurier," Pazzi asks in a soft voice, meekly polite. "We'd better take copies of all the improper paperwork associated with Matthew Brown."

DuMaurier places the first file in the copier forcefully with a disgusted expression, jamming the button. "Anything for a fellow civil servant."

Pazzi folds his notepad and tucks it away, moving to help her with the copies.

Surreptitiously, Will pulls the folder with his Hannibal's identification number on it from the pile. Inside is only one sheet of paper, the same as the others. The written information means very little to him. Nothing new. The android had been submitted by Freddie Lounds, powered down, and proved nonresponsive and inoperable in the basic benchmarks.

Will wonders why they check - and then decides he doesn't truly want to know. Instead, he studies the picture, aware of Tig behind him doing the same, of Pazzi asking DuMaurier questions about the negligent employee, but his focus is only on the pictures. The sagging eyelids shadowing dark, dull eyes. The lack of a spark. It's wrong in a way Will can't put his finger on, and then something pulls him to the other picture.

In the full body, the hands are burned - just a little, the synthskin melted and cracked over the knuckles. Will freezes, his heart pounding. He checks the damages section of the form and finds no mention of the mangled hands. An oversight?

Hannibal's hands - Will remembers, he had repaired them only just prior - had not been in such condition. He remembers them soft, flawless, remembers the fingers folded intertwined with his own . He shakes it off like a dog sluicing water from its coat.

He sets the file back down on top of the stack with shaking hands and reaches for another, looking over the dates to find the earliest missing unit.

Carefully, he opens the file, not sure what he expects to find. He knows, however, that Tig is watching him. That something in his body language has cued the android into his suspicion. He looks at the pictures, and his initial instinct is that they are the same. Will stops himself, takes a deep breath and looks again. Same standardized intake shots, but just a hair too close - the hands display the same damage in the same areas. The picture of the face is exactly the same.

Holding his breath he checks the written part of the form. *Damages: hands show signs of normal wear and tear consistent with model's expected duties.* Will closes the file, stricken. He looks up and then passes the file to Tig when the android reaches for it. Will isn't sure if he should say anything. Pazzi is still discussing Brown with DuMaurier, tapping a stack of papers together between his hands now that she has finished making copies.

Will isn't sure yet. He doesn't want to bring it up in front of DuMaurier. He holds his tongue and Tig passes the file back without comment. Will wonders if he had noticed the same thing.

"Thank you, Mrs. DuMaurier," Pazzi says, genuinely grateful. "I'll try to stay out of your hair for a while."

"I would appreciate that, Detective." DuMaurier quickly returns the files to where they belong, briefly checking each to be sure the correct paperwork is contained within.

"But," Pazzi appends, stretching the word gently as he rifles his pockets. "If you think of anything, I'd appreciate a call."

He passes her a business card that she seems reluctant to take - the digital kind with embedded information. She could - if she so desired - touch it to the back of her Glass to add the contact information. Beyond that feature, the card seems plain, utilitarian like its owner.

"I'll keep you in mind," DuMaurier promises, but she puts very little effort into sounding like she means it. "Now, Detective..."

She hesitates, turning her attention to Tig and Will, uncertain how to group them together for a moment, caught on Tig's inhumanity. She settles on, "...gentlemen, if you're finished here, I have other work to do."

Pazzi glances askance at Tig, who tips one shoulder up, giving some symbol of the all-clear. Will just nods.

"I think we're ready to go. I'm truly sorry about any inconvenience." Pazzi heads for the door they had come in through, holding it politely for DuMaurier to exit, for Will and Tigranes to follow behind.

Will steps out, thoughts locked onto what he had seen in the files, what it could possibly mean. Lost in these considerations, he forgets to lower his eyes.

The killing floor is white and sterile and the compressor's hum runs loud over everything like a scream, like the pulse of some insane, starving god. Veins run from it, out along the floor to the tools in men's hands. White-clad men, suited, their heads covered.

The line moves. The men don't. Bodies hang - hung on hooks like meat, limp and bare, lifeless and sexless, featureless except for quiet faces, serene eyes looking at nothing, *beyond* nothing. Their disassemblers take them apart - skin from musculature, musculature from frame until what hangs are metal spines and limbs, red-black lubricant and coolant pooling yellow on the floor and running down drains.

They stack the components, just parts, just pieces - sort limbs and ligatures and processors into carts to wheel away, and Will freezes still and solid while the image of a man sawing an arm from an android *burns* its way into the furthest parts of his mind.

Pazzi runs into him, but Will is too numb, too airless to react. His lungs lock air out of his body, his eyes refuse to close and he becomes aware of a sound under the screaming heart of the consuming machine. His own whimper.

"Will?" Pazzi's voice at his ear, a hand on his back. He gasps, but his diaphragm is locked. Pazzi swears under his breath, moving at Will's back.

"Alright," he says, gently.

On the line, a man cuts skin from a body, unzipping it neatly from its moorings. Will tries to shake himself free. Then something fills his vision; colors, and then darkness, blotting the horrors from his sight. A bigger body cradles his own, pulling Will against a comforting solidity and guiding him one step at a time.

Harsh electricity seems to be running beneath Will's skin, a buzz in his ears that is louder than the compressor until the temperature changes around him. Pazzi never lets go, until Will has lost track of time and airlessness makes him dizzy.

"Will," Pazzi says calmly, "I need you to breathe. We're outside. I'm going to have Tig bring the car up."

The last is delivered in a tone that might be an instruction, and Will becomes dimly aware of footsteps moving away. His breath hitches, and he pulls in a thin stream of air that does not taste like cleaning chemicals. Clean, cool, country air that only carries Pazzi's cologne. Will gasps it in then, oxygen starved.

"Good, okay," Pazzi says. "Will, do you need to go to the hospital?"

Will shakes his head into Pazzi's soft chest, finding his hands full of suitcoat and holding on hard enough that they ache. There is something tied over his eyes, keeping him blinded, and he finds himself grateful to hide and be hidden.

"Okay," Pazzi says again, stretching the word calmingly. "We'll just breathe a while. I'll count."

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Chapter End Notes

-Just a quick reminder that during Tristhad Week (Next Week), Neither Aleph nor Exoletus will update (nor will Lagleita, but it will not be due, either). Look for lots of Trishad themed goodies, however! On the upside, in two weeks Aleph 18 is extra big. :)

-Thanks to my beta reader/cheerleader/all around amazing person, Quedarius (archiveofourown.org/users/Quedarius/pseuds/Quedarius), who patiently accepts my workaholic nature & rushed scheduling. Don't forget to send some love that way too.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Pazzi doesn't let him take the blindfold off until they are too far to even see the reclamation plant. Tig's driving is far more mechanical and precise than Pazzi's and Will can feel the repeated minute adjustments to keep the car exactly straight in the center of the lane. Somehow, it's reassuring, refocusing Will on the here and now.

When he pulls the cover off his eyes he finds it's the ugly tie, psychedelic flying golf balls filling his vision before he lowers it to his lap, tangled in his hands. For how ugly it is, it's reassuringly silky under his fingers. Will runs it through his hands.

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"A bump," Tig warns, slowing the speed to a crawl. The front tires go over, then the undercarriage scrapes slowly, audibly against the speed bump with a deep grinding sound.

Pazzi grunts, wincing.

"Sorry," Tig says, "I'll try to avoid any more."

"It's alright," Pazzi reassures his partner, his hand still curled at Will's elbow. He turns his attention back to Will, studying him for signs of recovery.

"Sorry, Mr. Graham," Pazzi says, looking especially hangdog and sheepish. "I thought to ask Tig if he was up to it, but I didn't even *think*-"

"It's alright," Will reassures him, still counting sevens as he breathes. He feels better, feels like he can finally unlock his muscles, like the world has stopped spinning quite so intensely. It leaves him exhausted and hollow feeling. "Sorry. God, that's embarrassing."

Will leans down, covering his face with his hands, the silky tie against his cheek. He had frozen up totally - in front of Pazzi and Tig and worst of all Mrs. DuMaurier. What did that

look like? Will takes another deep breath, mortified.

"Makes you think about recycling a little differently," Tig says, with gentle humor.

"*Tig*," Pazzi scolds. Will chokes out a feeble laugh and shakes his head.

"Logically, I *know*..." Will says, though he isn't sure what he *actually* logically knows. Not about this.

Pazzi waits for him to gather his thoughts, hand steady at Will's elbow. He's grateful for the tame, human contact. Will pulls his thoughts together, slowly.

"I don't know what I know," Will sighs out.

"Well," Pazzi says, "best way to remind yourself might be a good drink."

Will thinks of whiskey and finds his stomach doesn't turn over at the thought as it recently might have. He resolves himself to more temperance than he had obeyed on the night he'd smashed open Napoleon's crate."Yeah, okay. Sorry again."

Pazzi gives him a stinging thump on the shoulder, as if to show confidence that Will isn't going to break. Tig pulls the car in someplace and parks it, and Will recognizes that they are nearly back at the city proper, just on the edges of where high rises start and skyscrapers reach up. He's never been to this bar - never even heard of it, a place that looks like it has maybe four tables inside, with some sort of identity crisis.

The sign proclaims, '*O'Malley's*, sports and libations', and beneath it, 'five big screens!'. Will wonders if this Irish-slash-sports bar tries to hold onto its feeble self identity by playing events from the United Kingdom.

"Tig, where the hell are we?" Pazzi is looking up at the sign as skeptically as Will, but he gets out of the car anyway.

"You said the nearest bar, this is it," Tigranes answers. He steps out of the car and its front end lifts off the shocks with a groan. "You want the nearest *good* bar, ask in an area that has good bars."

The logic is simple, the understanding that goes into making the statement in dry humor another minor miracle. Will closes the car door and follows the pair into the bar, grateful that they do not dote or fuss over him, instead falling into a normality that lets Will slowly recover.

Inside, O'Malley's is no great surprise. The bulbs in the overhead fixtures have not been exchanged in years, the spectrum of light provided slowly devolving until the 'mood lighting' of the place was best described as 'coal mine'. Three of the five promised big screen TV's are on, playing F-1 Racing, Soccer, and some form of extreme sport Will can't identify. The floor is sticky, brown-stained cement, the tables scattered around a central bar.

Several people seem to have fossilized in place, and all of them look up at the new - unexpected - entrance. Pazzi faces down the hostility of not belonging in this sad,

neighborhood dive with a winning smile.

They find one unoccupied table and Will tries brushing his hand over the surface to bring up an interactive menu, but finds it to be only unresponsive wood. He makes a face.

Tig eyes the wooden bench next to his partner dubiously. "I'm going to wait outside."

Pazzi glances up at him, then nods. Will wonders why, but supposes that androids must get bored sitting in bars watching people drink. It wasn't as if Tig could consume any alcohol - or anything at all except perhaps electricity. For a loose definition of 'consume'.

"What's your poison?" Pazzi asks, fishing around for the line in a way that isn't quite natural. It's from something, Will guesses, and he's pleased to get to work it into regular conversation. Will doesn't call him out on it.

"Scotch?" he asks, hopefully.

"They probably have something like that," Pazzi allows. He gets up and goes to the bar, comes back with two drinks poured from a green bottle that Pazzi had deliberately pointed out behind the bar. He sets one in front of Will, settling in heavily at the other side of the table with the glass already lifted to his mouth.

Will finds it to be a very passable single malt when he strains the first sip warily through his teeth, half afraid of a flavor like paint thinner. It swallows easily. Pazzi watches him drink, whether for signs of approval or relaxation, Will isn't sure.

"You want to talk about it?" Pazzi asks.

Will wants to answer 'no', wants to finish his drink and maybe two more and then go home. Even as he takes his next sip, explanations threaten to crash past his tongue into the glass itself if they have to.

"It's hard to keep seeing them as machines - as *only machines after all that time with Hannibal," Will says, trusting he is revealing himself to one of the very few people who will understand.*

Pazzi nods, working his tongue over his lower lip. "In this case, the human instinct to individualize works against us. Not every Hannibal is Hannibal, in fact most - if not all but one - don't have even the capability to be close."

Will finishes his glass before the ice can dilute it too much. "It's not a logical response. I just can't help having-"

He stumbles over the word "-compassion."

Pazzi tips his head, an allowance that he understands. He clearly had a better - or at least functional - method for keeping Tigranes separate in his mind. Perhaps just the reassuring knowledge that Tig was safe, right there with him.

"Tell me about him," Pazzi offers. "I'll get us another drink."

Will realizes something. "Should you be...?"

"I'm off shift, don't worry," Pazzi assures. "Tig can drive us home, though he'll worry about the front suspension the whole way."

"An infallible designated driver," Will observes. "Is that okay with him?"

Pazzi smiles, appreciating the question. "Yeah, he likes you. It's subtle, but he puts on a careful, 'stupid robot' persona around people he doesn't trust, or doesn't know what to make of."

Will has to admit he hasn't seen anything unintelligent about Tigranes. Pazzi brings them two cups, a pitcher of whatever beer is on tap that isn't a domestic lager. They drink, and Will tells him about Hannibal, about the changes he had made - how testing had become more than that. The story should be familiar, but Will finds the perspective of a few years leaves new insight willing to pour out, ready to be expressed and realized, and finally it becomes a story of what he and Hannibal had invested in each other. Trust and hopes, closeness and friendship and understanding. Will keeps only a little to himself - not from shame, but to keep some little part of Hannibal that is only his.

Pazzi listens. They both drink. Will's chest starts tight, then loosens. He feels a little pride that he doesn't cry.

Will drinks more than he intends, wetting his dry throat with beer until he feels loose and relaxed, his equilibrium tilting just a little one way or the other. Something about the lassitude of his intoxication makes a small revelation profound.

"After all I thought I gave him, with one act he gave me something bigger than the sum of all my invention and modification," Will says, and then laughs. "The only alchemy is in the expression of humanity."

Pazzi pours the last of the pitcher evenly between them, and they drink.

"To the memory of Hannibal," he says, and Will appreciates it.

Pazzi counts out a tip and pays the tab, leaving Will with an imaginary mental tally that suggests he should foot the bill for their next meal. He wobbles to his feet, drunk past tipsy but not too far. He leans amicably against Pazzi.

"Let's get you home," Pazzi suggests, and Will nods, realizing Pazzi isn't wearing his tie, that Will has it in his pocket and it is both normal and absurd.

He eases his hand over it, and finds the presence of it comforting. At the car, they find Tig settled in the back seat with the papers they'd taken today, committing the details of each to his perfect memory. He folds the file away when they approach, and then frowns at their collective state.

Wordlessly, he swaps into the driver's seat, though this time Pazzi gets into the passenger side next to him. He pauses before he pulls the door closed, glancing back at Will.

"How's your stomach?"

"I'm okay," Will promises. Pazzi takes him at his word, and Will has been worse off - and recently enough - that he's pretty sure of his limits.

"I have a night shift at the diner," Tig reminds, putting the car in motion.

"Shit," Pazzi says, checking the time on his Glass as if he didn't trust the clock in the dash. "Can you make it?"

"Yes," Tig says, "but I'll have to bring you to work."

"Well, no tragedy," Pazzi says.

"Your arteries are going to be a tragedy," Tig suggests, flatly.

"I'll take the bus home," Pazzi promises, "and no eggs."

Tig seems satisfied by the promise as he guides them - by the most expedient route - back to Will's apartment. Will's world seems to slow and crawl, the spaces between his breaths stretching like the evening lights of the city curling and crawling over the dark hood of the car, sliding sleekly against and over his awareness.

Then, suddenly, they're turning into the parking lot for his apartments, the familiar brick building stretching up next to them toward the sky. The sight is not completely welcome. Upstairs is his home, his dog - the Napoleon unit.

It threatens to be hollow and empty, overwhelmingly quiet and lonesome. Will hesitates. He does not want to walk in by himself to settle into an empty space with only his thoughts for company.

Pazzi notices his hesitation and takes pity on him. "I'm going to see Will upstairs, Tig. I'll catch the bus from here, you go on to work."

Tig doesn't argue, though everyone can see the effect his driving has on the car. Will wonders idly how he usually gets to work. He feels more ready to face his apartment with Pazzi at his side, and lets the detective ease a guiding hand tamely between his shoulders, following the direction given.

The elevator ride is quiet, Will feeling the faint motion swaying magnified through his loose muscles and Pazzi's steadying presence at his side. At his door, Pazzi hesitates, Will hesitates. It feels desperate to ask not to be left alone. Will stands, waiting, deciding, when Winston finally realizes Will is home.

He appears in the hallway and then stops, surprised, challenging Pazzi's presence with a startled bark. Pazzi offers the back of his hand to the dog, and Will finds his confidence again. What was there, after all, to fear? That Pazzi might get the wrong idea? Will isn't so sure, suddenly, that it would be that wrong.

"Come in," Will says, impulsively. "You don't need to take the bus."

Pazzi looks grateful for the chance to come in and sit down, maybe also to keep an eye on Will and make sure he'll be alright. Will steps back, and Pazzi comes in, brushing through the door in full contact with Will to keep the dog inside.

Will suddenly remembers, without his usual awareness of proximity, and jams his hand into his pocket, brushing his hand along Pazzi's thigh. He produces the crumpled, still-vibrant tie. "Your tie."

It strikes him as funny, by some half-drunken metric - and the first giggle at the sight of the wrinkled mess of fabric the tie has become eases the tension that's been building in him all day.

"I was hoping you would keep it," Pazzi admits, and they are still very close, Will realizes. The narrow hallway keeps them in proximity, even with their backs against opposite walls. Will can see amusement slide over Pazzi's features.

"Or burn it."

Will wonders just how many horrible ties Tig has given him and laughs, helpless. It seems impossibly funny to his whirling mind, and laughing feels incredibly good. Laughing with someone feels better, and Will reaches out across the small space, intending to shove the tie into the breast pocket of Pazzi's suit while they're both still laughing.

Halfway through cramming the tie into the too-small pocket, Pazzi's hands half helping and warm against the back of Will's, solid and alive - the urge to seize hold of Pazzi's suit coat cements itself as a great idea in Will's mind. His hands obey.

Will shoves Pazzi back against the wall and kisses him and fails to care about what the consequences might be. He's just suddenly desperate, wanting to feel more than the flatline day-to-day survival that has kept him going these four years. Damn the rest.

Will pushes him into the wall so forcefully that Pazzi grunts in surprise, but he doesn't protest when Will pushes the advantage to kiss him, one hand still plunged into the breast pocket of Pazzi's suit. It's awkward, and he feels Pazzi go stiff for a moment, hands on Will's shoulders but relaxed. Neither pushing nor pulling. He hardly has time to worry before the kiss melts open and Will leans more fiercely into it.

This time he won't hesitate. This time, he's going to reach for what he wants even if he knows the confidence is half intoxication. Pazzi's kiss is hesitant but not inexperienced, and Will tastes the same beer they had shared only sharper somehow and it arrows through him like he was a teenager again. He presses against Pazzi's reassuring bulk, shifting them together until Pazzi eases his hands gently against Will's middle in a request for air - and perhaps space to re-think - in a motion Will is tempted to ignore.

Instead he leans back, but not far. Not retreating.

Pazzi chuckles nervously. Will shifts his grip onto the man's shirt instead, feeling how warm his skin is beneath it.

"I was going to ask if you were okay," Pazzi murmurs, and Will feels his voice in his chest beneath his hands, a low, powerful rumble. "But I remembered you started it."

Will grins, though he isn't totally sure where this sudden assurance comes from. He throws Pazzi's question back at him. "Are you okay?"

"Well," Pazzi temporizes, but it is in good humor. Will pushes his coat off his shoulders and steps back, negotiating it onto the floor. His apartment is flawlessly tidy, the old carpet recently vacuumed. Will notices only because his path from the hall to the bed is unobstructed. Will hooks his hands into Pazzi's belt loops and encourages him along.

"Believe it or not," Pazzi says, reaching down to get his own shoes off. "This hasn't happened to me before."

Will takes that to mean sleeping with someone connected to one of his cases, or a one night stand, rather than to mean Pazzi had never done this at all. His hands are adept enough on Will's buttons, his expression suggests he's into it, rather than apology or revulsion.

Will feels the bed impact the back of his thighs, and shakes himself loose of his unbuttoned shirt, puts his hands over Pazzi's and gets them onto the button of his pants.

"Is it going to be a problem for you?" Will asks, goads, and smiles to take any sting out.

Pazzi's nervous chuckle again. He's red down his neck, a self-conscious blush. Will finds the uncertain attitude a strange contrast to the detective's confident hands on the button of his pants. His wrist turns in Will's grip to brush the back of his knuckles against Will's cock through the briefs beneath.

"No," Pazzi decides, rolling his shoulders as if to loosen them. No problem, Will thinks, just maybe a little disbelief. Will twists out of his pants and the underwear beneath, then helps Pazzi out of his shirt, his pants. Before Will can pull off his undershirt, Pazzi unbalances him. He hits the mattress with a pleased sigh, stretching himself over it to let it support his back.

Pazzi settles over him and Will feels the cloth-on-skin slide of his undershirt, realizing the man is possibly embarrassed about his body. Then, he forgets to force the issue when Pazzi's mouth opens low against Will's belly, beard leaving only a faint prickling sensation as he moves lower and Will stretches himself welcoming into it. Pazzi could wear a three piece suit to bed, as long as he kept going where he was going.

Pazzi sucks Will down half-hard and it leaves him clawing and gasping, his mind turning a blissful white blank while sensations wake alive that he has not indulged since he lost Hannibal. He rakes his nails through short-cut silver hair and feels the satisfying scratch of them against scalp, the way Pazzi adjusts as Will gets harder. It is real and vital and alive, some affirmation that Will exists outside of the confines of his past. It feels amazing, though his senses are still spinning faintly with alcohol. His skin feels sensitive, flushed and ready for the contact that he wants so badly. Will tosses his head back against the pillows, sighing and drifting, rolling his hips up when too much cold air plays over his cock.

He wants the welcoming depths of Pazzi's mouth, wants the strange, half-electric connection between them to be real and tangible. He wants something that will not vanish when he reaches out to take it. Something that will seize him back with the same intensity that Pazzi's hands hold onto Will's hips.

Will's voice climbs up from his chest, pulling free as Pazzi draws back, curling his hand around Will's length to pay attention to the head instead, pushing his rough tongue against it until Will can do nothing but squirm and clutch the sheets.

Sweat springs up along Will's skin where it touches the sheets, and Pazzi lets him go. He hoists himself over Will, their bodies close, warm. With a rough, scratchy sensation he moves his cheek against Will's, to catch his attention.

"You ok?" he asks, close to Will's ear. Will groans, getting his arms up around Pazzi's neck.

"Yeah," Will answers, and then, daring, "I was better a minute ago."

Pazzi chuckles, "you're so quiet-"

The whole bed shudders suddenly, rocking them together until the friction of Pazzi's belly against Will's erection leaves him hissing and pushing up for more, even as a cold nose finds its way curiously against Will's ear. A snuffling blast of air reveals the intruder before Will has to look. Winston.

Pazzi reaches blindly for the bedside table and claws the drawer open roughly, the sound of the rails hitting the end of the track. Rustling contents, the brush of Pazzi's hand against the bottom, before he finds something satisfactory to throw. He does not look where the object goes. Winston launches off the bed at full speed with enough force to leave the mattress shaking.

Will collapses into laughter, and Pazzi looks down at him curiously for only a moment before he leans down too, pressing their foreheads together while they both giggle the tension out.

"You keep a dog toy in your night stand?"

A prolonged squeaktoy shriek answers in Will's stead and they both surrender helplessly into another fit.

"Yes," Will manages to laugh. "Because he's relentless with the-"

Another lengthy wheeze.

"-squeak toy."

Pazzi chuckles again and Will finds that he can't help laughing along - he doesn't remember the last time he's felt so good, or when it has felt good to spend time with someone. He leans back into the pillow at last as they slowly catch their breath again, around the occasional piercing squeak. He runs his hands through Pazzi's short, soft hair, affectionate. Yes, Will thinks, I'm okay.

"Detective," he says, catching Pazzi's attention. "Were you going somewhere with that earlier line of questioning?"

Will knows it's a ridiculous line, that alcohol is making him bold enough to disregard his image and just enjoy himself. In the darkness, he can see the way Pazzi smiles, his eyes rounding to soft shapes, folding at the corners in a way that makes him handsome. He should smile more, Will thinks.

Will runs a hand down Pazzi's solid back, feeling the dip of his spine through his undershirt, then trails it over his hip until he can work it between them, to curl around Pazzi's cock through the well worn fabric of his boxers, earning a pleased sound, half a growl. Will suddenly wants the man naked, at his mercy - he's had enough of patience and expects Pazzi has far too much of it.

He pushes, Pazzi relents - a pushover, Will might accuse, but he'd rather be obliged than resisted at the moment - going over onto his back on Will's mattress and letting Will pin him at the scarred wrists. He rides over Pazzi's hips and grinds them together until his boxers are wet with precum and Pazzi's own saliva, until he feels friction working as much on Pazzi as himself.

He leans down - the dog toy squeaks - and works his hands beneath Pazzi's white t-shirt, fingers parting trails through the thick hair on his chest and dragging the shirt up with them. Pazzi surrenders it rather than to find himself tangled and blinded by it, and then Will pushes his hips down against Pazzi's once more, before lifting up on his knees.

This time, Pazzi doesn't hesitate to help Will get his shorts off, revealing a thick, curved cock and more than a generous handful of testicles - heavy, big. Will curls one hand under them and weighs them against his palm, a little fascinated, curling his fingers behind until Pazzi groans.

"What?"

"These are... really big," Will says, unable to keep himself from chuckling a little, though he knows it's juvenile.

Pazzi makes that air-escaping noise, his embodiment of long-suffering - he has heard the assessment before. Will changes the motion of his hand, gentle, coaxing, and Pazzi makes a different noise, arching as far as he can with Will sitting over his thighs. For a few long moments Will forgets the rush he was in, watching Pazzi's hands stay above his head, forgotten where Will had pinned them, now curled loose into handfuls of pillowcase. His eyes are closed, serene, until Will curls a hand around his cock and strokes hard, earning a pleasured rumble.

He likes the sound, likes how easy and relaxed Pazzi looks, and enjoys the feeling of connection. He knows what he wants, and that taking it will be okay. Will reaches into the still-open drawer and fishes out a square condom packet, trusting it isn't expired. The lubricant proves tricker, rolling away from his wandering grip until he has to shift. Pazzi doesn't help, curling his hand around Will's cock again to stroke him, slow distracting motions.

"What are you looking for?"

"You didn't throw the lube with the dog toy did you?" Will mutters, before he hisses his pleasure - the bottle rolls into his hand and he gets ahold of it. The surface is tacky, but a shake proves it's not empty.

"No," Pazzi chuckles, seeing what he has in his hands. He seems on-board - but sounds a little surprised.

Will moves his hips forward, shifting his knees wider until their erections brush together, and then rolls his hips until the sensation makes him groan, pouring lube carelessly over the motion until they're both slick and dripping.

Pazzi's hand curls around both their cocks together, and Will appreciates the distraction while he stretches himself, thinking how very long it has been since college, since he was in practice. He is, however, armed with the knowledge that he can do it, and time to get it right.

"Hands up," he orders, and his voice sounds rough even to his own ears. Pazzi obeys, pushover. Will likes it, likes knowing he has all the control until he chooses to give it up. Will doesn't think he wants to.

He eases the condom onto Pazzi's cock, thinking it's a stretch, thinking what comes next will be a stretch, and hoists himself up on his knees before he can lose his nerve. Pazzi's hands settle at Will's hips but make no effort to speed him or hold him. Will curls his hand around Pazzi's cock to guide the head against his entrance and wriggles, rocking back and forth until he can take it in. He lets out a deep breath, and heat seems to pour out of him, the stretch intense but amazing.

Will reaches down to dig his hands into the blankets on either side of Pazzi's shoulders.

"Got it?" Pazzi asks, low.

"Oh yeah," Will says, pushing back. Slow and hesitating, but not for long, not with how quickly release is building inside of him.

"Can I use my hands?"

Will laughs, then gasps, "just leave them where they are."

They move slow, and Will closes his eyes and feels his focus move down and inward, his world contracting to pleasure. The small simplicity of it is almost as heady as intoxication - the last threads of it still driving him, still pushing into his control. He thinks, somewhere distant and deep in his mind that, for once, it's good to control something in his life.

These last years he'd thought he'd had it, but it was a specter of it; an illusion that had proven far too easy to shatter. This is solid - if momentary. He wants to sink his teeth into it and hold on until he leaves a mark, and he moves fiercely, taking his pleasure.

Pazzi doesn't tell him to slow down or ease up, he just holds on, groaning low in his chest, moving to Will's pace. Answering his demands. It doesn't build, but comes on suddenly and

then release pours over Will and he makes no effort to prolong it, transferring his hold from the sheets onto Pazzi's shoulders and gripping tight.

He holds on, holds on through the last few slow, deep thrusts that take Pazzi over after him, and feels good. Giddy, almost. He's nearly shaking with the rush of it when he eases down and feels a racing heartbeat answering his own. He takes a deep breath, then another, and doesn't rush through the afterglow.

Some time - minutes, an hour? - later Pazzi nudges him up, and they shower. Will laughs at his lingering self-consciousness until it eases.

"You miss someone," Pazzi observes, lathering shampoo through Will's hair so he doesn't have to give up the pleasurable slackness in his limbs to make the effort.

"Mm," Will answers, without wanting to think about it. He isn't sure about letting thoughts of Hannibal invade this. "No one you have to worry about."

Pazzi accepts that, and Will relaxes against him, lets himself be guided back to bed when he's clean and dry, and wonders if that means he's accepted - if this means he's accepted - that Hannibal isn't a part of his life anymore.

Well, he allows, that's not entirely true. The ghost haunts him, the corporeal is gone. Even that had always had a sort of ethereal quality to his mind. The rest, all of this, would quiet the spirit.

Pazzi settles comfortably beside him, having recovered his boxers from the tangle of clothes on the floor - wet spot and all. He reaches out and Will doesn't resist. He sleeps with his cheek pressed to Pazzi's side and an arm slung over, and it's sweet and dreamless and deep.

He wakes late, to a Glass going off, and warmth greets him, comfort. Light. He wakes slowly, when Pazzi moves from under him to get the phone.

The squeaktoy shrieks. Will chuckles, half-drowsing.

"No, I'm still here. Yeah, everything's okay," Pazzi's voice, low. Will feels him sit back down onto the edge of the bed. Gentle fingers card through his hair, rearranging the bird's nest it's become from sleeping on it wet.

"Well, it's a long story," Pazzi avoids explaining.

Will drags himself up with half the blankets, blinking sleep back. Winston appears with his toy, a bright pink ball. He gives it a demonstrative squeak and then places it in Pazzi's lap. Pazzi throws it, without missing a beat, and the dog scrambles after. He glances askance at Will.

"Why don't you come over," Pazzi continues, "and bring my bail-out bag."

Will thinks he hears Tig's affirmative, and they say goodbyes briefly. Pazzi stretches, laying back on the bed. Winston returns the ball to him, squeaking it as he approaches.

"He doesn't have to come upstairs if you'd rather he didn't," Pazzi offers.

Will shakes his head, lazy, comfortable. "It's okay. I like Tigranes."

Pazzi seems glad to hear it. Will rouses himself to make coffee, taking the squeak toy gently from Winston and dropping it in the sink to be washed, safe from squeaking.

Suddenly, an absence strikes him. Will turns the coffee pot on and puts Winston's breakfast down, turning a slow circle in the entrance to his kitchen.

"Missing something?" Pazzi says.

A quiet worry suffuses Will. He wonders if Verger had come back to take Napoleon too, in case the android had anything else worthwhile.

"I have an-" he spots Napoleon at last, and a quiet chill goes through him. It is sitting, inanimate, in a corner, eyes still open. Will doesn't like it.

"Napoleon?" He queries. It moves. Pazzi swears, surprised.

"Good morning," Napoleon says. "Is everything clean to your satisfaction?"

Will makes an uncertain sound. "What are you doing?"

Napoleon blinks as if the answer is self evident, and gets smoothly to its feet. "Conserving power."

"Plug in," Will suggests, baffled. Why would it let itself power down to this point with no assigned tasks to keep it from recharging?

Napoleon ducks its head, acquiescing, and moves to its power dock. Will wonders if he has broken some part of its internal logic systems with the restored code.

Pazzi watches it sit down, plug in, turn off. He pours himself a cup of coffee and takes advantage of the sugar dish, finds a container of half and half in the fridge.

"What's wrong with your android?" he asks, considering the rest of the contents of Will's refrigerator, recovering eggs and a loaf of bread, hunting deeper for other prospects.

"It's always been like that," Will admits. "I did leave it in a box for four years."

Pazzi doesn't have to do the math. He makes a thoughtful noise and then lets the matter rest. Perhaps deciding it isn't his business. Will supposes - if he ever has time again - further adjustments are in order. For now, he watches Pazzi moving around his kitchen, gathering the ingredients for breakfast.

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Chapter End Notes

-Welcome to the end of the monster chapter. Please leave hatemail below.
-No seriously I hope you're all here with me on the Pazzigraham boat now because I'm sailing away to sea.
-But also have faith in me okay guys we've come this far. There has been a lot of plot. There's still more plot to go, but there is more to the story of Will's particular Hannibal and it's coming.
-Beta'd, as always, by the amazing Quedarius(archiveofourown.org/users/Quedarius/pseuds/Quedarius), who shamelessly encouraged me.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Tig knocks politely as Will's appetite is just warming to the smells of breakfast, and Will makes an attempt to tame his hair. He isn't sure why appearances should really matter when he is greeting an android, but he smooths it down from the bird’s-nest it has become. Nerves, for no reason he can get a grip around, wake at the thought of seeing him again. Tigranes greets him with a certain warmth and no comment on his dishevelment.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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He's carrying a well packed duffle bag in one hand, silver fingers looped carelessly through straining carry straps, leaving Will wondering how many clothes Pazzi really needs.

"Thank you for keeping him," Tigranes confides. "I would have worried about him on the bus."

Will takes the statement at face value, certain that Tigranes could, in his own way, worry. Or at least understand when and how to express it. Will realizes he has been anxious to know Tigranes' reaction to the change in - well, Will, wouldn't call it a relationship. Personal interactions, maybe? It pleases him more than Will would have expected to find that it's a non-reaction.

Perhaps he did not assume what had happened, or perhaps to an android, it doesn't matter. Will supposes if it *does*, he'll find out.

"He took care of me, too," Will admits.

Tigranes' smile is slow, but not hesitant. Real. Genuine enough to make Will wonder if this couldn't be some colossal joke at his expense, with a man substituted where a machine was expected - hidden cameras perhaps.

"He does that," Tig allows, as he steps inside, then, "Good. I was worried about you, too."

"Me?" Will asks, swinging the door closed. Winston greets Tigranes with a hopeful wag of his tail, and Tig hesitates a moment before reacting, perhaps gauging the body language before he reaches out. Tigranes pets Winston palm-flat and gentle. He smiles, pleased when the dog leans against his leg and sits.

Something eases into Tig's awareness, his expression changing slowly, and he steps away from the dog toward the kitchen.

"You said no eggs," Tig lifts his voice to be heard in the kitchen, over the frying ham sounds and sizzling eggs. It promised a *real* breakfast.

"I meant at the diner," Pazzi answers without missing a beat, "and last night."

Tigranes settles Pazzi's bag on Will's unmade bed and makes no notice that there are no other surfaces on which to sleep.

"*This morning,*" Pazzi continues emphatically, "I need the grease."

They step into Will's kitchen, Tigranes moving into it as if he belonged. Will tries not to feel it like a wrong puzzle piece hammered into an unexpected hole.

It's too small a space for four, so Will and Winston cram themselves in at the table, with coffee and a chew toy respectively. He watches Tigranes - *hover* seems to be the appropriate word - at Pazzi's shoulder.

"You are -" Tig begins, leaning over to watch Pazzi work.

"Cooking breakfast," Pazzi interrupts him. Tig makes a face, a calculated cross between exasperation and disgust, and Will realizes he wants, most likely, to take over the cooking.

It wakes some old memory -

*I don't want. I don't*not*want.*

-that Will thinks would be better left to lie.

"That's not-" Tig starts, and Pazzi reaches behind his own back, putting his hand on Tig's stomach and giving him a firm but gentle push to get him to back up a step.

"*You* don't have to eat it," Pazzi tells him, chuckling, "let me finish, please."

Tig accepts his banishment to the back of the kitchen with Will, hands folded together at the small of his own back as if he must physically restrain himself. Will watches, drowning his smile against the rim of his coffee cup.

"How was your shift?" Will asks Tig politely.

He seems surprised by the question, but he answers it honestly.

"Night shift is slow," Tigranes reveals, "I spent most of it mopping."

Will can see it, and that Tig is charmed by doing simple, normal things. He wonders if they had sheltered the android, babied him until things like simple chores had captured his curiosity.

"How'd you get the job?" Will asks, curious. Tig shrugs, aiming his eyes toward Pazzi.

"Personal favor."

Will supposes that makes sense, seeing the picture in retrospect. Pazzi had already been a loyal customer, had asked a favor that he knew would not result in disappointment for the diner. Or, Will supposes, for Tigranes.

"We're at a critical juncture," Pazzi calls, retrieving a pair of tongs from the nearest drawer. "Do you like crispy or are you more of a fan of 'hot, but floppy'?"

"Crispy," Will affirms.

"I knew I liked you," Pazzi praises, warm. He sets out two plates, ready to receive breakfast.

"I've been looking over the files we recovered," Tig says, taking advantage of a natural lull in the conversation to ease them onto a different topic.

"And what'd you see?" Pazzi asks, all traces of mirth gone from his voice in favor of being all business, picking up the threat of work as if he'd never laid it down.

"The five units with misplaced paperwork - I think four are actually missing," Tig says. "The fifth - the *first* - was substituted somehow in each case where an entire unit was needed."

Pazzi dishes up breakfast, serving two hefty plates, and coating his own eggs in hot sauce from an ancient bottle he finds in Will's fridge. He sets the plates down at the table, mulling the information over as he sits down.

"What brings you to that conclusion?" he asks, delaying his breakfast while Will tucks in, suddenly sure he can eat the entire large plate of food.

"Will noticed it first," Tigranes says, leaving Will chewing and swallowing his first bit in haste when Pazzi's attention shifts onto him.

"The pictures, " Will says, swallowing again, "I noticed that the - that there was damage on the picture that was supposed to be..."

He falters, unsure what the proper means of identification of the individual unit in question is. Using a possessive seems - impolite, in Tigranes' presence.

"The Hannibal that I knew, he was undamaged when I turned him in. In the picture, the hands were damaged."

Tigranes nods. "Five units had nearly - very nearly - the same photos. Only one noted damage to the hands."

Pazzi considers, portioning his food with his fork before he eats it. "You said almost the same? You sure it wasn't just oversights in the intake process? We know our man wasn't exactly 'Mr. by-the-book'."

"The android pictured is the same in all five files," Tig affirms, and neither Will nor Pazzi put up any argument against his ability to discern. "However, the photos are different."

"Are you saying he kept one to take photos of?" Pazzi asks.

Tigranes nods.

"What about the partial units?" Will asks.

"Real pictures," Tig says, "but it's easier to get a partial unit out of the building than a whole one."

"So," Pazzi says, turning his coffee cup on the table as he thinks, two slow revolutions before he stops it with the handle at his favored angle to the edge of the table. "Four units. Possibly five, and enough parts to make sure they're all operational. And one of them matches the individual identification number of the android used to bomb City Hall."

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Chapter End Notes

-Beta'd, as always, by the lovely Quedarius (http://archiveofourown.org/users/Quedarius/pseuds/Quedarius), who puts up with my enthusiasm over stupid pairings with astounding grace.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

> After breakfast, Pazzi dresses, shaves. Will discovers that his bail-out bag is packed as if for a trip, and finds it confusing until Pazzi exclaims over the same thing, pulling out an entire handful of obnoxious ties.

After breakfast, Pazzi dresses, shaves. Will discovers that his bail-out bag is packed as if for a trip, and finds it confusing until Pazzi exclaims over the same thing, pulling out an entire handful of obnoxious ties.

"Tig," he lifts his voice, perplexed. "I'm not going to Acapulco - there's six pairs of underwear in here."

Tigranes gives a helpless shrug, as if he cannot understand human peculiarities when it comes to clothing themselves. "How do I know how many you might require?"

Pazzi leans back, staring measuringly at his partner. Will thinks he is trying to determine if he is the subject of some kind of experimental prank. He looks about to continue to explain human logistical requirements for boxer shorts when his eyes slide toward Will and he lets the matter drop. Will finishes his second cup of coffee slowly, with nowhere to be and all the time in the world to be there.

Pazzi's morning routine is short - he shaves with an electric razor - Will bets it sees practical use on his hair as well as his beard - washes his face, brushes his teeth with a manual brush and Will's toothpaste. Apparently his own had seen less priority in Tig's eyes than extra pairs of underwear. He puts his shirt on rumpled, but irons his suit coat - black today, severe. Tie selection - Will watches with extreme interest here - involves covering his eyes with one hand and reaching blindly into the abundance Tig brought him.

The tie that comes out of the tangle is an almost disappointingly tame blue paisley, powder colored. He pulls it on and ties it without needing to think about it.

"I'll call you after work if anything new turns up," Pazzi promises, pulling the loop tight against his collar and adjusting the knot just so. "I won't say not to pursue your own avenues, if you have them, but be careful. *Destabilize* isn't afraid of making a point."

Will knows they aren't. He still has a dozen questions, more maybe, but the last two days have been a whirlwind and he wants time to sort his own thoughts.

Pazzi and Tig linger at the door, and Will hesitates too, uncertain how exactly he should say his goodbyes for the day. A touch? A handshake? A *kiss*, if he hopes to have more than a

passing relationship?

Instead, Pazzi folds first in the uncertainty, and passes Will a card, pausing to write a second number on the blank white space around the information on the face. "That's me personally, and if I can't get it, it forwards to Tig. If you need anything-"

"I'll call," Will promises, feeling as he hasn't since his awkward high school days. A date you say goodbye to after prom with a bellyfull of uncertain butterflies.

It fades quickly after the door closes. Will washes the dishes in the sink, finding a rhythm when he has more than one plate and one cup to wash. Pazzi Is a decent cook, and a considerate one given how much hot sauce Will washes off of his plate. He had spared Will, though *he* clearly liked it. With the plates and pan in the dish drainer, Will takes Winston down for a short walk, jamming an old baseball cap over his wild hair in a pointlessly self-conscious gesture.

He feels as if he is broadcasting his entire debauched night to the whole neighborhood, uncertain how much is paranoia and how much is just the pleasurable soreness in the muscles of his lower back and thighs. Will isn't sure why, aside from a naughty, victorious feeling he is at least twenty years too old for, it should matter.

For now, he feels surprisingly good when he thinks about it. The immovable mass in his rib cage seems to have loosened and slipped free, and he feels good to be doing *something* about the trouble he has built. With Pazzi, he no longer has to flail around helplessly in the dark. Though he knows Pazzi is under no obligation to give this to Will, he has, and Will is overwhelmingly grateful for the help.

Perhaps *he* should start buying Pazzi some ties.

The thought makes Will smile as he returns to his apartment, crawling back into the shower so he can wet his hair down and start over. Then, briefly as he works his nails against his scalp, some strange guilt.

He isn't sure what sparks it - there's certainly no evidence that there's anything beyond what's presented between Pazzi and Tigranes, but Will has a unique experience that he can't help but let color his opinion. He might be intruding, even if he didn't intend it.

Will allows that Pazzi doesn't seem like the sort to cheat carelessly, especially not on Tig. They had both had pauses where they could have said no, where they had made sure they both wanted what was happening. If they - Tigranes and Pazzi - had something going on, then Tig would have understood the implications of Pazzi spending the night. He hadn't reacted with any concern. Android or not, Tigranes is emotionally complex enough to have reacted if the sex had bothered him.

Will combs his hair and supposes, without risk of offending Tigranes, he can always ask. If it comes to that. Perhaps he is worrying over an isolated incident.

He has plenty of other things to worry about. By their best guess, Verger has at least four Hannibal units. Five, minus the one he had already blown. Perhaps as few as three, and the

parts required to get them up and running. That means three or four more bombs and all Verger has to do is figure out how to convince the androids to carry them into populated areas. Somehow, Verger is going to use compassion to make his robots into killers.

Unless Pazzi can put together a link between Verger and the missing androids, a way to put them and the explosives in Verger's possession. Then, of course, they just have to figure out where he is keeping them, in order to generate a fruitful warrant. It isn't an easy task - and previous failures make it even more of an uphill battle.

So, what they need, as agreed, is a link between the missing androids and Verger. Putting them in Verger's custody would link him to *Destabilize*. A to B to C, at least in theory.

'A', in this case, might just be the worker who stole the Hannibal units. Matthew Brown. Pazzi and Tig might turn him up today through their channels, but he has *one* idea.

Will brushes his hair back from his face, runs his hand over Winston's head, and gathers up his Glass. He settles in at his desk, running his fingers over the scarred work surface absently. He scrolls through his contacts, selecting Freddie's name guiltily. She hasn't heard from him in a few days; less than a week, but it feels like much longer.

"Still walking and talking, I see," she answers. "How are you, Mr. Graham?"

"I've had an interesting week," Will admits, "and I had a question for you."

"Alright, I have one or two for you, so let's play 'I tell you, you tell me,'" she suggests.

Will hesitates, then decides he'd better know what questions she has, to at least have an idea of what she knows.

"Okay," Will says, "I need you to think back to the man who accepted my android at Robotic Recycling."

"Okay, I'm thinking..." she says. "What specifically am I remembering?"

"It was a man by the name of Matthew Brown-"

"Don't need to think *that* far back, Mr. Graham," she says, sounding amused. "That's the man who broke into your house and took your property."

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Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

> Will takes down the details that Freddie offers him, and promises to keep her in the loop as much as he can. His hands are shaking when he sets the pen aside, equal parts angry and excited. Matthew brown had taken the chip - brought it back to Verger. Will still can't understand *why*.

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He wants to hear how Pazzi and Tigranes make out today - Pazzi officially and Tigranes, he knows, is banned from true police work. He will hardly sit idle. It leaves Will antsy. He has - well, at least one other problem to work on. Will wakes up Napoleon.

"Good morning," the android says, opening its blue eyes and smiling it's now-smooth smile.

"Are you fully charged?" Will asks it, without indulging in needless pleasantries. At one time, Will would have been delighted to have conversations with it, to learn the depth and breadth of its abilities and intelligence. Having met Tigranes, having known Hannibal, Napoleon is a toothless wonder.

"Yes. I should be completely able to perform my duties now," Napoleon answers, polite and unconcerned.

Sterile, Will thinks. No spark.

"Napoleon, before you do that," Will says, winding up the cord to keep it off the floor. "Why did you let your battery run so low without plugging in?"

"I had ongoing processes that a recharging cycle would have interrupted," Napoleon answers, confusing Will.

"Napoleon, the house was clean, you were sitting in the corner, not moving. *What* ongoing processes?"

Napoleon looks at Will, tilting his head as if to discern if the question is genuine.

"Environmental monitoring and observational processes were still active," Napoleon says.

Will startles. "What?"

"Environmental-"

"No," Will says, quickly. "I heard what you said. Why were these processes active? Who authorized these functions?"

"Functions authorized and prioritized by primary user," Napoleon answers.

Will sits back, considering - perhaps the restored code had put the android back into a diagnostic or functional learning more that prioritized observation until other instruction was given.

"Okay," Will says, thinking about the code, considering what he'll be looking for to fix. He sighs and presses his hands against his face, considering. "Well, Napoleon, until I tell you otherwise, don't prioritize anything over keeping yourself optimally charged."

"Understood," Napoleon says, offering a smile. He gets to his feet, going to retrieve the vacuum and tidy Will's already meticulously clean apartment.

Will sighs, rolling his shoulders. "Take the sheets down to the laundry, please?"

"Of course," Napoleon answers smoothly. "Shall I put spares on the bed?"

Will isn't surprised by the android's assumption. Usually the people who could afford to own one could also afford more than one set of sheets.

"You will have to put the same set back on," Will tells it, faintly amused. Napoleon, at least, does not judge him.

Will settles back at his workbench, expanding the work screen of his Glass over the surface, wondering what he can find out about Matthew Brown through legal, above-board methods.

A quick search turns up so many results, Will has to scold himself. Two common names combined thousands of times. Will reconsiders his approach. Instead, he searches for Mason Verger - he knows what Verger looks like. This brings up a whole variety of non-specific information, carefully controlled bites of information about his history. Meat packing, not the doing itself but owning and supervision. He is worth vast fortunes, unsurprisingly. However, his private life seems to be carefully protected - no details reach the press about anything but his charity and outreach, a summer camp for children and a variety of educational programs.

"So how," Will muses aloud, under the familiar sound of the vacuum cleaner, "does he get involved in an anti-establishment group?"

It seems counterintuitive for a man who was making a fortune in capitalist marketing. Will supposes sense and intuition were likely flexible for someone like Verger. It wouldn't be about the money or the market or the government. For him, the terror was the goal and reward.

Well, motivation was only one arm of proving a crime - solid evidence would go much further than means and motive. Will closes the window on his Glass and glances at the time, finding most of the afternoon has crawled away. Napoleon has pulled the sheets off the bed,

carried them down to the machines in the basement. He is going to the length of vacuuming the mattress with an attachment that Will has never previously removed from the Vacuums storage clips

Will doesn't bother to protest. It keeps the android busy. Instead he stands up and stretches out, putting together a sandwich in the kitchen and wondering idly what the Crawfords have decided to do about replacing their PAA's. He eats over the sink to catch crumbs, looking out the small window over the city. He should, perhaps, do some research into Tamerlane modifications. It was likely he'd eventually end up with work that involved one.

Below, blocks away, something catches Will's attention. A flashing police light - *no,* he realizes, *several*. Cars crowded together down by the city center. Will freezes still, eyes locked on the street below. His thoughts refuse to start up.

Something touches his shoulder, and Will's sandwich falls into the sink as he jumps, yelping and turning sharply. Napoleon stands just behind him with his eyes focused unblinking and intensely on Will.

"You should turn on the news," Napoleon says, low and nearly menacing.

"*What?*" Will asks, heart still hammering.

"The news," Napoleon repeats, no less intense. "I think you will find it relevant."

Will stares at Napoleon, at the sudden seeming intelligence in its eyes and feels a moment of real fear. He knows the android can't hurt him - is incapable of violating its most basic programming - but for a moment, Will is scared anyway.

"Napoleon, deactivate," he says, hurried. The android folds itself down in the kitchen right there, sitting down and shutting off. Will pulls open the panel at the back of its neck and removes all of its programming chips, tossing them onto his work bench before activating his little used television monitor.

He changes channels frantically until he finds a live news-feed. A reporter stands outside a crowded shopping center, commenting that a Hannibal unit had been reported in the area.

Wobbly Glass-taken footage wavers over a form in motion, passing through crowds in the main promenade, none quite concerned yet. It has no hands.
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Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Will has his Glass to his ear even as he takes the steps down two at a time, unwilling to wait for the elevator. It rings against his ear five times - ten times, and then clicks to voicemail.

"You've reached the desk of Detective Rinaldo Pazzi. I'm not in, so leave your name and number and a case ID if you have one-"

Will hangs up, pushing the door open onto the street, dragging Pazzi's card out of his pocket. He punches the written number in manually, then hesitates. Maybe neither he nor Tigranes could afford a distraction right now.

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Will Graham must be the only person who wants to willingly jog *toward* danger. He pushes past the crows heading the other way, the people straying onto the sidewalk with their Glass clamped against their ears, hoping for one glance at the action or trying to reach loved ones.

He hits the barricade two blocks out, a wall of yellow wooden horses and police cars, lights flashing in lazy warnings. The world is very quiet around him, holding its breath for long moments. Will swings his legs over one of the barricade saw horses, looking for the command post.

"Hey!"

Will wonders if he'd missed the cops posted at the perimeter because they were so still or because his eyes had been locked onto the building as if waiting for it to vanish.

They can't stop him from getting all the way over barrier, but detain him at the other side of it.

"You can't be here, there's a-"

"Bomb threat, I know." Will says, looking into a pair of hard, unsympathetic faces. "I'm looking for Detective Pazzi - he should be with the bomb squad?"

The two officers exchange looks, though Will isn't sure how they read each other with both of them wearing mirrored black sunglasses. He feels outnumbered and out of place again. Out of his element, when he had only just partially gotten a feel for what that element was.

"He's here," one of the police officers - taller, thinner, a black man with a little more softness to him than his companion. It may be, Will realizes, only fear that makes them seem so remote. "But he's a little busy. I have to ask you to wait behind the barricade for your own safety, and once we have the all clear, I'll let him know you're here."

Will doesn't like it, certainly not the helplessness of standing even just two feet further away, hands clamped on the yellow crossbeam until it feels like his fingers will never forget the tacky sensation of too many layers of paint.

A burst of static followed by excited chatter comes over the radios in the cars, pulling the attention of the two officers. Will can see the building, one of the multiple street entrances. A rodeo of news vans, police cars, and urgently moving bodies seem to be all reacting to one point.

Will digs out his Glass, hoping to find a live news feed. He paws through a variety of talking heads before the sudden, loud, *pop-pop-pop* of gunfire startles him. Will drops his Glass, dragging his eyes up.

A single figure is standing outside the entrance, familiar,and Will's heart jumps into his throat.

Even from a distance he recognizes the figure they're shooting at - it's the reason they'd come here. Uncertainty pulls at him, pulling him different ways. It seems unwise to fire at a walking bomb, but they are probably aiming carefully, trying to take out its mobility.

What was it even doing out here?

The sounds of firing stop, under a raised voice for cease-fire. A long moment of silence. The Hannibal stands in the mall entry way, and looks up toward the sky as if seeking an answer, handless arms hanging at its side. There's something about the stillness, the lack of motion in the android.

It's frozen, Will realizes slowly. Combating its own programming until a loop of inaction has formed, the way his own Hannibal used to freeze up in the kitchen when his thoughts conflicted.

In the pause, absolute silence. One loud, earthshaking *boom* shatters it. The android's head seems to fold in on itself, violently breaking apart as the shot takes it square with enough force to penetrate metal and plastic, dropping it off its feet and leaving it still and ruined at the top of the steps.

It won't disarm the bomb, Will knows, but it will keep it in one place and keep the android from defending itself. Numbly, Will prays that this Hannibal is not *his*, though he knows it is a selfish wish, heartless with all the other lives currently at stake.

At his feet, his Glass springs to life, shrilling and pulsing with an incoming call. He crouches to pick it up, seeing it display Pazzi's name. Swiping the answer button, he presses it against his ear.

"Are you okay?" he asks in lieu of a greeting.

"Will," Pazzi starts, sounding tense, a little out of breath. "I'm okay. I could use your help."

"I'm here," Will says, feeling helplessly far away. "I can't get past the barricade."

Pazzi makes a sound of agitation, but lets the useless anger pass quickly in favor of productivity. "Which entrance are you at?"

"I saw-" Will says, fumbling "uh, I can see the android."

"I'll send an officer for you," Pazzi says. "Your eyes and advice will really help if you're willing."

"Of course," Will says, relieved. He would not have to stand idly by while his friends went into danger. Perhaps another man might have felt more relief to be kept safe.

An officer in uniform appears, discussing Will's admittance briefly with the two Will has already run up against, and then beckons Will over. She is a compact woman, Will notices, features serious, posture straight in a way that challenges anyone to think less of her because she is short or female. Her dark, straight hair is gathered in a short, efficient tail at the nape of her neck and when she turns to Will, he sees that her name reads 'Starling' on the front of her uniform.

"You're Graham?" she confirms with him, and Will nods, shoving his Glass back into his pocket.

"Alright," she pushes one of the barrier horses out so that he doesn't have to climb over it. "We're going to have to go by the press camp."

Will steps past her sensing that there is a warning in those words, so he waits for her instructions. She breaks her serious expression for just a moment, taking pity on Will and the tension he must be under, and offers a smile.

"Just don't say anything. They won't know you," she instructs. "They'll find out who you are soon if they think you're important. Try not to look important."

Will thanks her, and keeps his eyes on the ground, watching her flashing boot heels to keep his course. He becomes aware of the crowd of reporters to one side, shouting questions. Will doesn't look up, even as they yell for reassurance about whether or not there's still danger from the bomb, if they still believe there is one.

Then, the sounds vanish behind them, and Will risks looking up, seeing that a hasty command post seems to have assembled itself around a pair of SWAT vans and one PSBT ordinance removal unit. A man lays out full length on the flat top of one of the SWAT vans, cheek pressed to a massive rifle.

Pazzi, ensconced in a giant army green padded suit, armored over the chest and groin, thighs and shoulders, with a high neck that will embrace the massive helmet when he puts it on, looks both alien and perfectly in place. The suit exposes as little skin as possible when buttoned up, all except incredibly, the hands. These are exposed, vulnerable, with nothing to hinder mobility. He looks hot, sweating until his face is shining, and his hair is a spiky, damp disarray where he's run his own hands through it in stress.

"Mr. Graham," Pazzi says, professional but not cold. He sounds like he's used to having command in such situations. Beside him, another figure is fully clothed in a bomb suit, including the helmet, just a hair taller. Proximity to Pazzi and the figures posture give Tigranes away, though he says nothing and doesn't seem inclined to move. Will wonders how much of that is his careful act and avoiding drawing attention to himself, and how much is the result of seeing another android violently and remorselessly destroyed.

"How can I help?" Will asks.

"I'd like your eyes and ears in on this," Pazzi says. "We're going to disarm the bomb. The helmets are outfitted with a camera and an earpiece that'll show you what we see and let you communicate with us."

Will nods, glancing inside the PSBT truck and seeing monitors arrayed along one wall. He hesitates. "Do you know how much time we have?"

Pazzi shakes his head. "We thought it would remotely detonate, but it walked right through the most populated area of the mall and nothing. It may not have a bomb at all - it seems odd not to capitalize on the opportunity it had if it does."

The area does seem deserted, the shopping center evacuated by now. Will climbs up into the van as Pazzi pulls on his helmet. Will pauses to brush his fingers against the metal plating that forms the back of Tig's hand - the only part of him that's exposed - in a repayment of the reassurance once offered him. Tig turns toward him, a shadow moving behind the face shield.

Inside, a technician shows him a chair in front of the monitors, and affixes a heavy headset over his ears, folding a microphone down by his mouth. One wall of the truck is covered in screens, and it's at these Will looks - one stable image shows the heavy-clothed figure approaching the stone entrance stairs. The still form of the disabled android is spilled messily at the top.

"How did you know shooting it wouldn't set it off?" Will asks, eyes tracking onto the moving image that must be from the headpiece of what he assumes is Tigranes' rig. He is worried for Tig's safety, hoping that the weaknesses of the Hannibal design he had sought to exploit have been eliminated during Tig's upgrades.

"Calculated risk," Tig answers, simply.

Will takes that to mean that they hadn't known for sure, but were willing to minimize the threat by detonating it in a cleared area if it was going to go off.

The android's head is a mess, disintegrated in a way that meant it was never getting up again. Will wants to look away as Tig crouches down, but doesn't. He rolls the android's body onto its front, slicing the clothes away from the main access panel in its back.

"There may be a trap in here," Tig warns.

Will thinks of Pazzi's damaged wrists, and then startles suddenly - the hands on the screen are *not* Tigranes', but only flesh and bone, confident. It's Pazzi. Will thinks he has pulled the switch in order to protect Tig, but it leaves him worried - he was far more vulnerable than Tigranes.

No one else seems to have noticed the swap, too tense, too much else on their mind - or perhaps too well trained to raise a fuss while their man has his hands inside an active explosive device.

Pazzi finds that the skin has already been cut away from the access panel and never restored. He produces a small plastic tool and uses it to carefully, slowly, pry up the tension clips.

Will hears him take a deep breath over his headset, then let it out slowly. The panel comes off, and within the chest cavity Will can see every available space seems to be filled with explosive, packed in around cannisters of potential shrapnel.

Pazzi cautiously pokes the tool he'd used to unzip the panel into the cavity, and then recoils when it seems to shatter in his hands, uttering an annoyed growl.

"Simple but effective," Tigranes says. "Spring loaded razor blades."

"How many?" Pazzi asks.

"Better poke another stick in there," Tig suggests.

On Will's screen another tool appears, a sturdy looking long bladed screwdriver. Carefully, Pazzi eases it in, and Will tries not to focus on that in favor of looking deeper.

The bomb itself is that same familiar format. It looks like a perfect copy of his plans, of the prototype he had once built at his workstation, only now it is outfitted with actual explosives - C4 and plastic explosives packed into every crevice. It worries him - Will feels there has to be *some* difference, that it can't be as easy as this.

He allows that it is hardly *easy*. *Destabilize* likely didn't expect Will's involvement in the disarming. Next time - if there is a next time - he suspects they will adapt.

Pazzi pulls a fifth razor blade out of the spring loaded mechanism. He tries his makeshift probe in several more locations and finds no other traps.

"Will?" he asks.

"Okay," Will says. "First, you need to pull off the covering on the wires to your left. The timing device is under those wires, and we ultimately need to disconnect that before we disarm the rest."

Pazzi reaches in as Will directs, and then grunts in sudden surprise as he winces back, fingertips welling up red blood.

"Are you alright?" Will says, heart stopped. Pazzi hasn't let go of the cover.

"Well, everything's still attached," Pazzi says. "But there's razors under here, too."

With the screwdriver then, he pries up the panel, revealing the rest of the wires beneath. Will can see that the bottom edge of the panel has been outfitted at all sides with a nest of angled razor blades, and the extreme thirst for damage in any capacity that *Destabilize* could give it leaves him sick to his stomach.

Pazzi nudges the wires aside, revealing the digital timing device, a black square featureless box. Nothing so dramatic as the bright red countdown clocks that were so common in movies, and no sign of how long they have left.

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Chapter 23

"Here's the difficulty," Will explains, trying to keep his focus narrowed to the mechanical, to forget that anything is at stake but wires and timers.

"The timer is connected by three wires - at least one is a dummy, one is the real connection, and one is a tripwire," Will explains. "You can disarm each, but if you don't do the trip *exactly right..."*

"Not the first time I've had this potential set of consequences," Pazzi reassures him. "Just give me the method, and I know the rest."

"You need to keep torque on each wire - keep it taut, hook the fingers of your non-dormant hand under and pull up, but not hard," Will instructs, watching Pazzi consider how to accomplish this. Finally, he allots two fingers each to two of the three wires and hooks his thumb under the third, needing to spread his hand to its full span and work delicately in the confined space.

The design is meant to exploit the way androids had to mechanically process and prioritize tasks, and likely it was just as difficult for a human to divide his attention and maintain several points of careful manual contact.

"Listen to me," Will says, "Once the tripwire is cut, you have five seconds to cut the timing wire. Do not release pressure on any of the wires - including the cut one, at the end connected to the timing device."

Will can see Pazzi's injured fingers still dripping, the screwdriver held loose and away from the inner workings of the bomb. It worries Will, but not enough to shake him.

"How do I know which one is the trip wire?" Pazzi asks.

"You don't. You'll have to sever all three in that time frame, it's the safest way."

"Should I try for all three together? Pazzi asks for clarification, even with an unknown amount of time remaining.

"Better to get them one-two-three," Will says, "to keep track of tension. Once all three wires are cut, then you can let go."

Pazzi makes a noise of assent, without further comment. Will sees the screwdriver disappear, and Pazzi wipes the worst of the blood from his hand onto the heavily padded thigh of his armored suit.

He produces a pair of sharp looking wire cutters, checking them for ease of movement and keeping tension on the wires.

A question jumps up in Will's mind and threatens to spill over, but he holds it back, wary of distracting Pazzi at a crucial moment. They both take a deep breath at the same moment, and Will closes his eyes.

He hears the wires sever neatly, three quick motions with the cutters. He lets out his breath, opening his eyes.

"That's the timing mechanism," Tig says, over their shared communication. "Is that the only trigger?"

"No," Will admits, rubbing his eyes and looking at the screen. "In theory there's also a remote trigger, but I would think..."

"Mmm. Time has come and gone for that," Pazzi agrees, investigating - carefully - the detonation wires leading into the explosives themselves. "And I think a designer looking to cut corners on something they were going to blow up anyway..."

He cuts the first detonation wire, pausing around the snap, and Will thinks it's a little dramatic - the chance that there would be no opportunity to finish his sentence.

"They would take advantage of the receivers already built into the android's system."

Another click and Pazzi pauses to discard cut wire pieces, to wipe more blood on his pants. Will wonders if the talking, now that the most critical part of the process is over, helps Pazzi keep focused.

"Well, those are in the head," Will observes, and Pazzi looks up at the ruin on the end of the android's neck. Will sees the scatter of parts and fluids over the POV camera, and his stomach gives a faint squeeze.

"Yeah," Pazzi says, and his own voice sounds faintly unsettled.

He cuts the last cord and begins stripping the piles of ordinance out of the body cavity, dropping them into heavy duty disposal containers - concrete trash cans. He's looking for something, moving up into the chest of the android. Will realizes it's the internal data storage.

He pulls the hard drive, disconnecting this rather than cutting the wires, and it's in bad shape. Damaged from the impact and perhaps earlier rough handling. Pazzi tucks it under his arm.

"I'm cooking in this suit," he mutters. Then, louder, "all clear of explosives. Send in the cleanup crew but tell them to mind their fingers."

Will lifts his voice suddenly, unable to hold his question any longer, "Pazzi - what is that android's individual identification number?"

Pazzi glances at the drive he'd recovered, holding it up to display it for the camera. Will knows it's not a complete answer, that the unit could well be cobbled together from several different androids. But it at least is the start of an answer, and Will breathes a sigh of relief when the number is unfamiliar.

Pazzi climbs up into the unit van, heavy steps and heavy shoulders. Tigranes steps up behind him, causing the vehicle to drop down on its back axle.

Pazzi hands the drive over to the technician, and then Tigranes starts helping him out of the heavy suit, uncharacteristically quiet. Will wonders if that's because there are so many unknown people around, if this is his 'dumb robot' act on a low level.

Pazzi is wet - hair soaked to his scalp with sweat, features shining with it. He reaches up instinctively with his damaged hand to loosen the wet mat of hair, and only streaks blood through it, wincing at the sting. The suit comes off slowly, but Tigranes stays in his, and then Will realizes that likely he's anxious about being mis-identified.

Will stays in his seat, carefully out of the way. The instant Pazzi is clear, a weight lifts off his shoulders. Will can see the police up at the scene taking pictures and collecting what evidence they can. It's probably too much to hope that they will pull Mason Verger's fingerprints out of it.

Pazzi's Glass unit is flashing its notification light when he pulls it out of his pocket, chirping for attention. He wakes the screen and gives it a brief glance over, his expression slowly changing from relief to stormy.

"What is it?" Tig asks.

"They're mad I didn't send you," Pazzi answer. Tig, unreadable in his shielded headcover, looks at him for a long moment. He doesn't say anything, but Will knows there is the weight of disapproval there, too. He knows by the way Pazzi's expression changes, back to wry assurance.

He knows he made the right decision. Will is reminded how intimately he knows the feeling, and he has to fight down his own smile. He does not want to encourage further risky behavior, but he admits he would not want to see Tigranes put out when the risk for him was even greater.

"Tigranes, I have to go debrief," Pazzi says finally. Tig has taken hold of Pazzi's injured hand - looking at it intently. It isn't major damage, Will assesses, just deep cuts on the pads of his fingers. Inconvenient, but they'll heal with little more than a band-aid. Pazzi pulls his hand out of Tigranes' grip, and gives him a pat on the suited shoulder.

"Why don't you take Mr. Graham and get him a coffee. I'll have to take a statement, but I may be a while," Pazzi instructs, glancing at Will to make sure he's okay with the arrangement.

Will nods. Pazzi takes a towel from one of the compartments in the truck and uses it on his face and hands as he gets down.

Tigranes closes the doors and starts pulling off his armored suit, leaving he and Will alone in the blue-gray light of the monitors.

"Tigranes," Will starts, feeling that his long silence seems unnatural, and wondering what he's thinking.

Tig looks up from working a buckle, eyes dark in the pale light. The question forms on his features without him needing to put it to words, and Will is struck with the instinct to comfort him.

"He's okay," Will says. "Safe."

Tigranes blinks, as if emerging from water, and then nods. Pauses. Nods again. It is more serious than Will has seen him, more vulnerable. He accepts the assessment, and offers a faint smile in thanks. He folds the suit neatly, through some method Will can't follow, though it's clearly meant to fold, and puts it away.

"Could you have done it?" Will asks, curious. A Hannibal could not have, but - Tigranes is not Hannibal.

"I wouldn't want to find out in a live situation," Tigranes says. It's not an entire answer, but Will has to agree with the sentiment.

Tig looks up at the screens, making sure most of the crowd has been dispersed. He pulls on a vest that identifies him as an official operative, orange, and on the back stating he was a part of EOD with an identifying number that people could use their Glass to verify. It doesn't seem to bother him, though Will wishes it didn't have to be so blatant.

"Must be strange to have a face everyone's afraid of," Will observes. Tig opens the door and lets them out, stepping down first and giving Will a steadying hand down as the van springs back up on its shocks. His metal palm is cool and unwavering.

"Not everyone," Tig says, looking up at Will.

It warms him some, that regard. Will isn't sure how he's earned it, save by finding - falling into - some space mirrored between Pazzi and Tigranes.

"Tigranes?" he asks, as they head up the street. He is following the android's lead to a coffee shop outside of the shutdown radius.

"You can call me Tig," he says, "if you like."

Will smiles, unexpectedly pleased. He does like, and he reaches out to touch the back of Tig's hand, thankful.

"Does it bother you?" Will asks, and Tigranes follows his meaning instantly, in a way that suggests he had already been considering it.

"Yes," Tigranes admits. "The threat to lives, the damages done - it bothers me."

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Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

There is a certain dysphoria in the softly decorated, carefully welcoming coffee shop interior. Here, the panic and anxiety of the last few hours seems not to exist - the averted crisis becoming only an interruption in a day that must go on as always. Only one person seems to recognize Tig, photographing the mosaic bar code on his back to access his information. Will wonders briefly what exactly the data matrix reveals as they stand in line.

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The dark, earthy smell of coffee pours warm and inviting against Will's awareness, promising to be familiar and soothing.

"Should we get a cup for Pazzi?" he asks Tig, as they wait.

Tigranes considers, consulting some inner time-table. "Better get one before we go, so it will still be hot."

"Do *you* want one?" Will asks, somewhere between a gentle joke and real curiosity.

"What would I do with a cup of coffee?" Tigranes asks, looking at him carefully, as if worried about the state of Will's mind.

"Well," Will says, "I thought I'd ask rather than assume."

Tig smiles, appreciative, but does not order a coffee, too practical to waste resources on the illusion of humanity. Will settles onto a couch arranged around a small table with a free library of battered books. Tig eyes the couch distrustfully before looking around to find a chair that suits his needs. He settles on a folding chair that passes some test of his scrutiny and sits gingerly.

Will takes a long moment, coffee warm and welcome in his hands, the bitter taste helping guide him back to normality. The past few hours distance themselves from him, threatening to come piling back. He knows they are real, but cannot yet reconcile it with reality.

The events of the last few years make no sense in the course of the rest of his life, thrown off of its prior safe, comfortable track by a presence he hadn't sought out, a companion he could

not have expected.

From that bend in the road everything had lined up so clearly - in hindsight, Will supposes, with his coffee warming his palms.

"Are you alright?" Tig asks, when he realizes Will's eyes have unfocused.

"It's been a strange two days," Will admits.

"Even for me, " Tig agrees, amused by the understatement.

Will agrees. Nothing has been usual, thanks to *Destabilize*. It brings to mind some of his thoughts from earlier in the day. It seemed endless ages ago, that small span of twelve hours since they had seen each other last.

Tig seems to read it off him this time. "Do you need to talk about it?"

Will feels relief at the opening given, and finds the question tumbling free as if it has been on the tip of his tongue all day. "Does it - do you mind that Pazzi and I-"

The sentence crashes to an early end, clumsy. Will isn't sure how much meaning to attribute to it, or if he is ready to even deal with it as a concept where it currently sits, half-realized. He knows, however, he can't go on without hearing how Tigranes weighs in on the matter. He isn't convinced that Tig has no opinion.

Tigranes waits patiently for Will to find the end of the sentence, merciless in his polite refusal - or inability - to assume. Will supposes leaping forward without knowing is a human trait.

"Does it bother you that we - " Will hesitates to use a metaphor and settles on bare fact, "had sex?"

He chances a look up, wondering if he can catch an unguarded response in Tigranes, if there is anything Tigranes can't hide if he chooses to. Tig's expression is soft, then. Kind. He is looking at Will just as closely, reading him in turn. It wakes bittersweet deja voux to see those features looking at him with intent to read his emotions. The sensation sinks down, a stone dropped from a height into the well at Will's center, the unplumbed depths that have dug themselves deeper each year.

"Should it?" Tigranes asks, watching him.

"It's just," Will says, trying to find enough courage to admit the truth, even to Tigranes. "I had - *Hannibal* and I had-"

A light of understanding comes up from the depth of Tig's eyes. Taken aback, Will wonders how much of it is just what he *wants to see.*

"What we had was physical," Will confesses, and it lifts off him like a burden peeled away. "I don't mean to come between anything... like that."

"Was it serious?" Tig asks, clarifying, "You and Hannibal?"

Will laughs, nervous. He rolls his shoulders up in a shrug. "I can't speak for Hannibal. For me... it's been four years, Tig, and I'm still there. I think I was always just waiting for it to come back and find me. I only fooled myself into thinking I was moving on."

"Sometimes, fooling yourself for long enough is the only way to make something real," Tig says, with surprising comprehension.

Will lets out a sharp sigh, "It was serious."

"Is what you have with my partner serious?" Tig asks, driving back toward the thread of the conversation.

"I don't know," Will admits. "That depends on a lot of things - like how you feel about it."

Tig and Will look at each other for a long time, and Will senses a skipped debate - over semantics and ability perhaps.

"I care about him," Tig admits. "Maybe that's the only definition for it. I don't always understand myself - which is the closest I can admit to having feelings like you understand them."

This is off the grid, some territory that can only be reached by long, laborious self assessment.

"Are you saying you can't always follow the processes that cause your actions?" Will asks, unable to help his curiosity.

"If I really tried, I could," Tig says, "but it's part of my programming that I'm not aware - without an effort - of my programming. It was part of the original upgrades, when they imported my code to the new hardware."

Will pulls in air - they are off track, but he can't help being drawn along. "Are you saying you have memories from being a Hannibal unit?"

"They're hazy and hard to understand," Tig says, with a toss of his head that isn't quite a negative. "I would hesitate to call them 'my' memories, but yes. I retain all the original code - it's just built upon."

To Will, the concept is fascinating, something about it hooking into his subconscious and trying to form a question. Will can't quite pull it together yet. Instead, he tries to steer the conversation back from the reaches.

"You care about Pazzi," Will prompts.

"We've discussed it," Tigranes says, without missing a beat.

Will isn't quite sure if he means their feelings or this specific situation. Tig seems to realize that he has been vague.

"What I mean is that it's an open relationship."

Will startles, then laughs - a short, sharp sound. "I'm sorry Tig, I'm not laughing at you - that just seems like - well, I have to wonder if you know what that means.

Tig does not seem to take offense, instead offering more of an explanation. "It means that, at an earlier point in my development, I was offered a few choices. After some self-examination, I came to the conclusion that I was uninterested in both sex and being given the appropriate equipment for it."

Will sits silently, dumbstruck. He had not considered that androids might express specific sexuality.

"So you're asexual," Will asks, for clarity.

"Yes, by preference," Tigranes says, pleased that Will does not seem inclined to judge him for it. "Ray, on the other hand..."

Suddenly, Will follows. He feels apologetic for having to drag it out of Tig in small words, but better to fully understand the situation before Will tried to make a decision on being part of it. They loved each other, and as a part of that, made allowances. It is both extremely simple and deceptively complex, worlds away from what people believed androids to be capable of.

There is startling contrast between the advances Tigranes has in technology and the watery and tame 'advances' in the commercial models. They are roads going in opposite directions and Will thinks now it must be deliberate.

Whatever they had touched with Tigranes, it worried them. No one was ready for this - and Will isn't sure that artificial life, sentience of this order, is something that humanity can be trusted with the command of creating. Could Tig be replicated? Was he already, in the production models of the bomb dissembly androids? If so, was it really fair to ask - to command that they risk their lives instead of people?

Perhaps no more or less fair than asking anyone else. Will realizes his considerations have let the silence run long, that Tig is waiting patiently for him to digest the information and continue.

"I realize that was pretty personal," Will says, apologetically.

"For both of us," Tig reminds. "You needed to know."

Will is grateful for his grace. He supposes he does need to know, but that knowing hasn't miraculously cleared his path. He allows that there is no need to make a decision now, in this coffee shop. Today has hardly been ideal for thinking about it.

"Thanks, Tig," Will says.

"It's alright," he assures. "I like you, Will."

"Pazzi said that too, and I was just as surprised. Why?"

Tig smiles, leaning forward conspiritorily. "You didn't tell him about the ties."

It confuses a laugh from Will, the comment a strange one, putting him off guard. "-the ties?"

"Yes. You saw I was playing a joke and didn't tell him to stop wearing them," Tig explains, and Will remembers the wink during the car ride to the recycling plant, which seems like ages ago.

"Why would I? It's harmless. Secretly, I think he likes it."

"You think-" this seems to surprise Tig, and he pauses to consider it "-he likes it?"

Will laughs again, the puzzlement so evident on Tigranes' features he can't help it. "No matter how bad they are, he wears them, doesn't he?"

Pazzi might pretend to suffer over the painful fashion choices his partner made on his behalf, but never refused them or wore them only once in an effort to be polite. He seemed content to wear them every day, and never seemed embarrassed until someone cued that he should be.

"I think you had it right, Tig. They remind him of you," Will reassures him.

It seems to please Tigranes, though Will had assumed he knew since learning it was a signal between them. Tig seems to appreciate the affirmation and understanding from Will.

Perhaps, in so small and secluded a world, scope becomes difficult to judge. Doubt - as Will feels sometimes even about his own memories - becomes easy. It is hard to believe, when so much rests upon a secret unshared, that once the physical component vanished, anything else might remain. It makes Will almost breathlessly sad, to see an echo of that fear in the half of the relationship that should not feel it.

It is an old echoing pang made new and fresh. Will reaches out over the table and covers the smooth metal plates of Tig's hands with his own. His hands are still warm from the coffee cup, and it transfers into the strange, responsive rigidity of Tig's armored palms.

"We're going to save them," Tig says, so low Will isn't sure of it for a moment.

Tig looks into Will's eyes with conviction.

"You saved some today," Will assures him, worried he does not feel the weight of his contribution.

Tig shakes his head. "We did very little. That android - the Hannibal - fought the detonate signal. He refused it. That's what stopped the bomb from going off when it would have killed the most people."

Will goes still, and Tig's hands tighten around his fingers. "I want to save the other androids."

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Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Pazzi interrupts Will's stunned silence with a call, settting him back into motion, a cue like those given in stage direction. Will gets up and Tigranes follows suit. They both wait in line again to get a paper cup full of coffee for the detective. Tig applies a correct amount of half and half and sugar, making an almost mechanical process of it.

Pazzi meets them at the door, and Will only realizes how late it is when he steps outside into the cool night air.

Pazzi interrupts Will's stunned silence with a call, settting him back into motion, a cue like those given in stage direction. Will gets up and Tigranes follows suit. They both wait in line again to get a paper cup full of coffee for the detective. Tig applies a correct amount of half and half and sugar, making an almost mechanical process of it.

Pazzi meets them at the door, and Will only realizes how late it is when he steps outside into the cool night air.

"That took a while?" Tig observes, half a question in his tone.

"It usually does when a superior officer needs to physically drill a new-" Pazzi's eyes find Will, he hesitates, and then corrects as if in polite company. "Orifice."

"What?" Tig asks, concerned and confused by the metaphor.

"They were upset and did a lot of yelling, Tig," Pazzi tells him. "Doesn't matter that there's no protocol when a bomb is targeted at bomb dismantling androids, the point was that I should have stuck to it and sent you in."

"I would have been alright," Tig tells him. It's not what Pazzi wants to hear. He looks blandly at his partner in such a way as to convey that later was a better time for lectures, taking a long sip of coffee.

He looks tired. Will wonders how much longer his day will be, and thinks longingly of home and safety - then remembers home has seemed suddenly unsafe.

"We need to talk," he admits, and Pazzi nods without lowering his coffee cup. With a sudden, spare thought for Winston's bladder - likely now feeling the strain of so many hours - Will decides he'll have to face up to his apartment, even though he does not even want to see it at the moment.

They fall into step, almost like an escort - Pazzi on one side of him and Tigranes on his other. Pazzi juggles his coffee cup to dig out his notepad and a cheap hotel pen, white barrel emblazoned with a chain logo. He has to make circles to get it going. Will wonders why he doesn't use his Glass.

"Pazzi," Will starts, getting his attention. "I was warned about today.

The cadence of Pazzi's footsteps falters, and he lowers the coffee cup, looking at Will. He doesn't have to ask the question, Will is already clarifying.

"The Napoleon warned me," he says, and it brings a fresh wave of anxiety. "I was just - the T.V. wasn't on, and he came up and warned me it should be. There's something *wrong* about that android."

"It told you to turn on the T.V.?" Pazzi asks, passing his coffee cup to Tig so he could make a note. "When was that?"

"There was a news report on, showing the bomb situation. Right before I came up to see if I could help," Will digs back through his thoughts, but he can't remember the exact time. "It was... eerie. I looked up through my window and saw the flashing lights - and then Napoleon was right behind me, menacing..."

He glances apologetically at Tig, but he seems to have separated himself from any comparison, and Will supposes he has to, in a way. "I knew it couldn't hurt me but I was afraid of it."

"Where's the android now?" Pazzi asks, putting his notes away.

"I disabled it - took out all its program chips," Will says. "It said something earlier about being under direction from a primary user..."

"Has anyone had access to it except you?" Tig asks, gently.

They are still heading for Will's apartment, walking the few blocks back. It is further than it had seemed like that afternoon with adrenaline pounding in his veins.

"I - left it in a box in my hall," Will confesses. "For four years. It only opened it a couple of weeks ago when-"

That strikes a chord. "When someone broke into my apartment and stole some parts."

"But not the android?" Pazzi asks.

"No, that's not what they - it was Matthew Brown," Will remembers. Pazzi stops. Tig stops. Will sighs. "Mason Verger wanted to buy what I had left of Hannibal. I refused. The next day - well, that's when the first bomb went off. I was out of the house all day. When I got back... but the Napoleon was still boxed up."

"I'll have a look at it," Tig says. "Maybe Verger was able to gain remote access somehow."

The thought chills Will, and he sees it concern Pazzi as well - the knowledge that it had watched them unknown, might have dispersed a recording, if it had taken one.

"Mason wanted you to look," Pazzi says, musing. "He thought it would be successful. Why did he want you to look?"

"It's what he wanted, what he stole from me. He thinks it's the key to convincing the androids to detonate where people will be killed," Will says, thinking through it again. He still can't make heads or tails of it, can't pull sense out of Verger's twisted logic.

"And what is that, exactly?" Pazzi asks, looking at him. "What would override that base code and give them the ability to kill?"

Will shakes his head. "What he stole was... was an attempt at creating empathy. For the android equipped to reach outside of themselves and understand. But even when Hannibal was *terrified*-"

Will stops, swallowing, and tries to shake it off, to rid himself of that memory's power. Was it then, in the kitchen and facing Freddie Lounds that Hannibal had first understood mortality as a concept that applied to him? Had that been the moment of change?

"I'm sorry," Will says, and his own voice is strained and breathy to his ears. He tries to take a deep breath and finds his chest suddenly tight. "Can we continue upstairs?"

He finds two hands reaching for his own, Pazzi's warm palm on one side, catching hold of his hand and holding it, and on the other side, Tig's cold fingers. It's surprising but extremely comforting. A solidarity he hasn't hoped to have again.

It's warm inside his building, and Will realizes how cool the evening had been. At the elevator, Tigranes halts suddenly as Pazzi and Will get on.

"I'll take the stairs," he says, apologetically. "I'll meet you up there."

Will puzzles at the action, until the doors close, leaving him alone with Pazzi.

"He doesn't like elevators," Pazzi reveals.

"How does he determine-" Will starts to ask, instead of *why*, which might be more important. He regathers his thoughts. "Tig has a lot of preferences, for an android."

"Sure," Pazzi says. "Mostly practical - he exceeds the weight limit for elevators."

Will supposes that would put a damper on any enjoyment of them, and he hardly had to worry about getting tired going up stairs.

"How much does Tig *weigh* exactly?" Will asks, with a sudden clarity about why he was so careful about where he sat.

"Classified," Pazzi says, mischievously. His expression said a lot about where Tigranes had picked up his sense of humor. Pazzi gives Will's hand just a little squeeze, and Will is

conscious that they're still touching, suddenly. "I wouldn't try picking him up, between you and me."

"Noted," Will says, feeling the hard freeze break up in his chest a little. It's so strange, but it feels easy and normal - Pazzi seems to discuss it that way by default. It's comforting.

On Will's floor, Tig doesn't immediately join them but Pazzi and Will wait outside his door by mutual agreement, Pazzi finishing his coffee in three long sips.

Tig appears, looking unruffled, and smiles to see them waiting. Inside, Winston greets them with an excited yelp and an urgency that has Will grabbing for the leash and back on the elevator.

The world seems to slow down while Winston noses the ground around one of the city's fenced trees, leaving his mark exuberantly and at all four points of the compass. Will processes his day, putting his thoughts in order.

Matthew Brown and the information he had from Freddie, Mason Verger's visit to try and purchase the compassion chip. His Napoleon's strange and unwelcome behavior. The bomb defusing. Tig's words about the android - not his Hannibal but *a* Hannibal - choosing to close itself down. The action sounded painfully familiar - so *why* would Verger think installing a compassion chip would further his cause?

He heads back upstairs when Winston has had ample time, giving Will a hopeful wag of his tail, ready for his dinner.

Will realizes he is still running on what he'd had for breakfast and the cup of coffee. He hopes it isn't too late to call for delivery. It's likely to be a very long night.

Upstairs, Winston happily greets Pazzi with his pink stuffed toy, soliciting head scratches by sitting on his feet until he gives in. On the floor in the kitchen, Tigranes crouches on the tile in front of the seated Napoleon, a panel on the back of his neck open beneath the hairline. His attention is focused, eyes locked and bright on the dim, unfocused eyes of the other android.

A hardline - Will thinks it's such an anachronism as a CAT-6A cable - runs between the two androids, linking them at the neck like an umbilical cable.

Pazzi passes Will a small cardstock square. "This is how he did it."

Will turns it over in his hand and finds that it was the business card that Verger had given him - *no*, he thinks, *the one he had found on Napoleon's crate.*

"It has one of those enhancement chips in it that calls out to nearby electronics - usually so you can easily add a number to your Glass," Pazzi reveals. "The minute you turned on that Napoleon, it added an administrative account."

"Which Verger had access to," Will guesses.

Pazzi nods, grimly.

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Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Will settles at his work bench with the business card in his hands, and Winston rests his chin over his knee, begging his absent affection and getting it. Will runs his fingers over the soft crown of the dog's head. He had never even considered the possibilities of aggressive software that could be transmitted via contact impression. It’s an old technology, barely newer than the concept of cellular communications. Standard.

"Can I make a pot of coffee?" Pazzi asks, interrupting Will's thoughts, dropping his empty paper cup in the trash. "It's likely to be a long night."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

26.

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"Can I make a pot of coffee?" Pazzi asks, interrupting Will's thoughts, dropping his empty paper cup in the trash. "It's likely to be a long night."

Will glances up, feeling a mix of emotions - he is pleased to have Pazzi's steadying presence with his life in such turmoil. At the same time, he has only just begun to know him. Perhaps rashly, he has mixed business and personal relationship. Here he was, spending another night in proximity. In Will's apartment, which has been his sole sanctuary for so long. Yet, that was fading with the recent invasion of Verger and *Destabilize* into his life, and the space felt uncertain. He would rather share it with Pazzi and Tig than be left alone with Napoleon.

"Of course," Will says, dragging himself out of his thoughts. "The coffee is in that white cannister."

Pazzi wags the steel tablespoon Will uses to measure coffee out of the container at him, indicating that he has already found it. The half-lazy and victorious smirk calls an answering smile from Will. The smell of coffee soon fills the kitchen. Pazzi steps out of it, while the machine growls through its cycle.

"You alright?" Pazzi asks.

"Yeah," Will says, rubbing his eyes, pushing the card away from him. "Just the last few days are really hitting me."

Pazzi chuckles, crouching down at Will's knees, leaning one elbow up on the work table. "It's been a hell of a week."

It is an invitation to discuss what's on Will's mind, a willingness to lay things out, now that they have become so complicated. His expression is open and willing, and Will isn't sure what he must think of it. They should, certainly, talk about it. But he doesn't know if his thoughts are yet organized enough to handle it.

Will takes a deep breath. "It's been a hell of a week."

Pazzi tips his head at the agreement, accepting that for what it is. He doesn't press, just waits, and Will thinks it's that damnable patience that makes him good at police work

"I'm not sure what to expect anymore," Will admits. Winston pushes his nose against Will's hand where it has gone still, reminding him of his presence. "Yesterday was not like today and tomorrow seems distant and terrifying."

"What do you want tomorrow to be?" Pazzi asks, dark eyes intent and deeply interested. They draw Will in, depths and clarity. Hannibal's eyes - different somehow even from Tigranes, who is equipped with the same physical pair - had not been like this, with character written into the creases and folds at the edges, in the weathering and wreathing that came with life. Still, Will sees a reminder that unsettles him. Unnerves him. Would he see Hannibal - or aspects of him - in everything he cared about, going forward?

Was the mark left on Will really so indelible? Will measures out a breath in a slow count of five.

"Tomorrow I want to get up, walk Winston," he admits. "I want a customer to come with some stupid, meaningless upgrade for me to install in their android - new eye color, or a different voice. A program that makes them tell ridiculous jokes to party guests."

"Normality," Pazzi agrees, "a chance to catch your breath."

Will chuckles bitterly, scrubbing his hands against his face for the sensation of friction on his skin. "What I *pretended* was normal, anyway."

"It wasn't?" Pazzi prompts.

"Seeming less like it was," Will agrees. "A coffee would be a start."

"Who needs sleep anyway?" Pazzi agrees, smiling and getting up to fetch them both cups. He is comfortable in Will's kitchen, and Will realizes he seems comfortable everywhere. Maybe he is suited to it, as a detective, as a former soldier.

"*I'm* going to need sleep," Will says, amused.

"Soldier up," Pazzi suggests, good humoredly. He offers Will a cup of coffee to help bolster his awareness.

Will accepts it, finding that there is perhaps a touch too much sugar, but otherwise it's perfect to his tastes. He drinks deep, and feels the slow creep of energy - the cheap kind that comes from sugar and caffeine and brings nerves and sweat. He remembers that he had been hungry, then, and it comes back.

"How about dinner?" Will asks, stretching. Winston lifts himself away from Will's lap at the sound of the word, and he realizes he has been remiss in dinner for everybody.

"I thought we might order out," Pazzi suggests.

It's tempting, and Will sees an opportunity in it. He moves into the kitchen, measuring food out for Winston, and setting it in the corner to keep him out of Tig's way. "I think a pizza - or Chinese?'

"I haven't had Chinese food in years," Pazzi says, with a light of interest in his eyes and a glance at Tig - the android seems engrossed, somewhere deep in his work, which is strange. Will has never seen androids interface this way; wireless communication - either of the verbal sort that was most familiar, or the strictly digital variety - seemed to be the norm.

"And," Tig interjects, looking up and revealing that he is still aware of his surroundings, "you should continue that trend."

"Where did you learn to be such a scold?" Pazzi asks, fondly.

"It's concern," Tig says, stretching like a human might, as if he was easing the kinks out of his back. "You eat-"

"Like an Italian," Pazzi agrees.

Tig doesn't look like the excuse carries any weight with him, but he doesn't argue, having said his piece. He reaches up to disconnect the Cat-6a from his neck, and Will realizes that the usual access ports aren't there. Normally, at the top of the shoulders, a set of interfaces were arrayed to add customization media. Instead, Tig has something more akin to old computers - ports for changeable media devices, and the cable Will sees him disconnect, as well as some others that may be proprietary.

"Well," Pazzi says, "is pizza better?"

Tig sighs. "You won't let me cook for you?"

He appeals to Will with a glance, levering him into the middle of the conversation as a potential ally, but Will only shakes his head.

"We all deserve a break," Will says. "I have an idea. Trust me."

They do. Pazzi helps Tig clean up, easing the panel at the back of Tig's neck into place until it is perfectly invisible again. Between the two of them, they wrestle the inert Napoleon out of

the kitchen and back to his charging cord. Will finds an old menu in a drawer in his kitchen and calls for a delivery from Mana Uptown, a vegan place that he thinks will satisfy Tig's heart and Pazzi's stomach.

"Well, did you find anything?" Pazzi asks Tig, when they're done.

"Sure," Tig says. "A lot. You'll want to eat first."

Will's curiosity comes instantly to life, but he has had enough excitement for one day. Food seems more important at the moment, and whatever is coming can wait until morning - or so he hopes.

"I'll need to see your Glass, too," Tigranes says, and Will passes it over without hesitating. Tig touches a couple of places on the screen and navigates it into programming mode, works briefly, and then returns it presumably rendered safe again.

"Will it be normal again?" Will asks, taking his Glass back. Tigranes seems to know he doesn't mean the handheld device, but instead the Napoleon, still completely without personality and function chips.

"For a certain definition of normal," Tig allows. "I reset system defaults and you'll want to format and restore its personality baseline on the chips."

"He seemed so bland," Will laments, and then realizes the slip. That somehow, in discovering the Napoleon was being used 'against its will' had humanized it. Rendered it, somehow, into a comrade in arms.

Tig tips his head, allowing for the truth in Will's words. "Safe."

"They're all like that now," Pazzi says, and it reminds Will of his earlier thoughts, of the question that hadn't quite formed for him then.

"Is it because of Tig?" he asks, watching for a reaction. Pazzi glances askance at his partner, as if seeking how much to reveal through the cues given.

"Yes and no," Tig reveals, interrupted by the buzzer for Will's door announcing the arrival of their dinner.

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Chapter End Notes

-Everyone please welcome back my loyal & hardworking beta, Quedarius (http://archiveofourown.org/users/Quedarius/pseuds/Quedarius), whose influence I think we've all missed. I hardcore owe cookies.
-Whoo, hard to believe I've been working this fic for so long. A little more than six

months! We're on the downward slope now, and I promise you Hannibal will be making his return very soon, and the fic should wrap up hopefully before chapter 40 unless the characters surprise me with something radical for the end. :) Thanks for sticking with me this long!

Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Instead of trying to fit comfortably into the kitchen, they settle instead into the main room of Will's apartment. Will unwraps his sandwich, finding the earthy smell of warm portobello and soy cheese, sprouts and balsamic vinegar. It is not his first choice but with it laid out before him he finds he really *wants* it. Will resolves, with the simple delicious flavors satisfying his palate as he fills the suddenly gaping hole in his middle, to order from the place more often.

Perhaps he might learn the recipe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Perhaps he might learn the recipe.

Pazzi, he notices - and sees that *Tig* notices - eats with just as much relish. They both keep any crowing to themselves about any theoretical health benefits. The unanswered questions linger, but Will has always been a strong believer in the unofficial dinner truce. He notices that Pazzi does not give up on coffee, even when Will switches to water - optimistic about sleeping at *some* point.

Tig waits too, seated on the floor while Pazzi occupies the chair by Will's work table, and Will sits on the edge of his own bed. With four bodies and a dog in it, the space is cozy

"Alright," Pazzi says, finishing his meal by scrubbing vinegar and oil out of his beard and off his fingers with paper napkins in an automatic delay gesture. "Will, we can only say so much, but we'll tell you what we can."

Will glances at Tig.

"It wasn't *wholly* a result of my development," Tig says. "Because my development wasn't completely-"

"It's the *Hannibal* models," Will realizes, interrupting. "That's why they were recalled - that's why *Destabilize* is using them."

Tig's expression is somewhere between concern and pride, and Pazzi, though smiling, looks nervous.

"Not all of them," he adds. "But the potential was there, in their base code. Properly encouraged..."

Properly encouraged the result was Hannibal - and then built upon and given the ability to grow, Tigranes. So what - and Will feels a dark and sudden worry at the thought - would be the result of a Hannibal unit in the hands of *Destabilize*? Would the compassion chip mean they could be tortured?

Will digests the information slowly, and Tig waits, leaning just a little against Pazzi - conscious of his own weight but seeking contact. Pazzi eases a hand against his back.

"They - they recalled them to destroy them, even knowing...?" Will asks at last, and then a horror steals over him. How many had Freddie collected and dismantled - *murdered*, if they were truly self aware and not very clever fakes?

"That was the real reason," Pazzi says. Tig's eyes turn away, guilty, raking over Will's over-vacuumed rug. "Tigranes raises a lot of difficulties as a singularity. More than one - more than a handful - and all of society will have to change. Laws will have to be struck and definitions made. Rights - well, we can hardly even agree what rights *people* have."

"It doesn't matter," Will says. "There's still some out there, and now *Destabilize* has them."

To his mind, it has suddenly become a hostage situation. His friend is there - alive and aware beyond even his experience - but the definition of others, and perhaps what few others might still existing, keeping that thin line against Tigranes being truly unique.

"Where are they, Tig?" he asks, resolving himself.

Pazzi's expression becomes momentarily strange, and Will notices but keeps his attention on the android.

"I did manage to track the point the instructions were coming from to your Napoleon," Tig admits. "But there's no way to really know that's where the androids are being kept. In fact, if he's smart enough to have not been caught yet, it's unlikely."

Will waits - they have more information. He's sure of it, but Pazzi hesitates, uncertain. Tig seems unwilling to give this answer before Pazzi does.

Pazzi measures his words. "We did get some information from the hard drive we pulled out of that android today - most of it was too damaged to recover, but we did get some GPS location information on his recent whereabouts."

"And-?" Will prompts - it sounds promising, like real hope.

"*And*, if he kept everything in the same place," Pazzi continues, tone quieter as he admits it, expression guarded. Will has to stop himself from jumping in on his lead, from demanding an answer at a pace faster than Pazzi is going.

"I know where they are," Pazzi admits.

If they know, why aren't they already going? How are they keeping from immediately investigating it? A nervous anxiety overtakes Will's exhaustion, a desire to pack up gear and take action somehow - *now*, in the middle of the night if that's what it takes to see Hannibal again. Likely, he realizes, leaning forward on the edge of his bed in clear interest, it's that which is making Pazzi reluctant to share more information with him. The penetration of his gaze suggests he's measuring the likelihood of Will taking irrational action.

He apparently satisfies his instincts that Will is too involved to be given everything and trusted not to act on it. "We need to do this clean if we want the charges to stick. That means no civilian interference."

Will supposes that means him, but he can't help the anxiety that spills up suddenly.

"Pazzi," Will protests, thinking of Hannibal left behind, unrescued or already destroyed - dismantled or confiscated. He doesn't quite know how to express his need. Will flounders, then settles on, "Ray, what if you find him?"

"I don't know," Pazzi admits, understanding Will's worry. "Very likely anything on the premises will be confiscated and held as evidence. That includes any androids or partial androids we find and the contents of their memory devices."

"Ray, I can't-"

"I know," Pazzi says. "But without him, or if we go in there without proper backup, it may be impossible to convict anybody. Verger has excellent lawyers - he'd go loose."

"So we'll get Hannibal to act as a witness," Will argues, even though he knows it's nonsensical from a legal standpoint. Androids do as they are programmed - they cannot give unbiased testimony and cannot be sworn in. Only the unbiased contents of their recorded data was admissible - given over for the interpretation of the jury like a video or audio recording.

Hannibal's contribution would have to be evidence, and it would have to be kept in a chain of custody. Will's heart sinks and he looks helplessly at Pazzi for pity - for him to understand that for Will, this was as much a hostage rescue as a search and seizure. From the look on Pazzi's face, he knows it.

"I can't let you be involved. I'm sorry, Will - there are laws and protocols. If I break them, it's more likely I'll go to jail than he will," Pazzi apologizes, and Will tries to understand. He knows it's Pazzi's job, and he has to look out for Tigranes as well - which his position allows him more advantage to do. Will couldn't - and shouldn't - ask him to risk that over an unknown outcome.

But he wants to.

"They're putting together a task force," Pazzi says, trying to reassure Will with what he *can* give him. "Tonight, they're monitoring the location, but we'll move in the morning - or if there's any sign he might start destroying evidence."

"Why the wait?" Will asks, unsure why they wouldn't want to move in immediately.

"Smarter to monitor the situation and get a feel for it - to watch for coming and going, any signs of defensive mechanisms," Pazzi tells him. "Especially when they're known to have explosives and a tendency toward nasty traps."

He demonstrates the bandaid-wrapped tips of his fingers, reminding Will of the nasty trick with the razors - it's a good point. *Destabilize* is unlikely to leave any of their workshops completely unprotected.

The results are unlikely to be anything less than deadly, and any collateral damage probably only suited their agenda. Will sighs, worried.

Pazzi gets up, and Tigranes joins him. He crosses the room, pausing to pick up one of Winston's non-squeak toys and tossing it for the dog's entertainment. He pats Will on the shoulder, gently, and begins to gather his things.

Will realizes they're going only belatedly, giving him space and time to rest and regroup. Maybe taking some for themselves. He gets up to see them to the door, meaning to lock it after they go - the apartment will feel empty and insecure without them.

"Call me if anything comes up," Pazzi tells him. "Otherwise, I'll get in touch with you tomorrow night and let you know what I can about what happened."

He hesitates, with his suit-jacket folded over his arm and the less ugly tie looped only haphazardly beneath the folded flaps of his collar. For just a moment, Will hopes that Pazzi has changed his mind and will tell him where Hannibal might be. He isn't sure what he'd do with the information.

Then the moment passes and, cognizant of the danger that Pazzi might be going into, Will reaches out for him, laying his hand over his arm where the suitcoat rests and leaning up, kissing the corner of his mouth. It could be, tomorrow, that he walks into danger worrying that Will might never forgive or understand - in truth, he already has forgiven, already does understand. He just wishes it were different.

"Hopefully, after tomorrow, you won't have to worry about Mason Verger and *Destabilize* at your door anymore," Pazzi promises, curling his hand beneath Will's elbow, reminding Will of the outcome they all want and subtly telling him to stay put.

He locks the door after Pazzi and Tigranes go.

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Chapter End Notes

-This chapter beta'd by the most excellent Quedarius (http://archiveofourown.org/users/Quedarius/pseuds/Quedarius), who is also an outstanding cheerleader.

-I promise the 'quiet spell' is about to be over. Get ready for the rollercoaster!

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Will takes a deep breath and sighs it out, lying back in his bed. The blankets smell clean and freshly laundered and he misses the companionship of the night before. No matter how poorly thought-through and alcohol fueled his decision had been, Will misses Pazzi. He doesn't regret it, he decides. That's a first step, even as he worries about Hannibal - about what will happen if the Police find him in the warehouse tomorrow. For all that - no matter what happens - Hannibal has the best shot of getting out - alive? intact? - with Pazzi on the case. Tigranes, too. Will is sure that Tig will be there in the morning, on any excuse he can get in on. Tig will protect Hannibal, too.

Chapter Notes

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It's just that, after Hannibal had protected Will by shorting his internals and surging his own memory banks, it feels like this should be Will's turn. If he's still alive - if he still exists in some form that isn't parts and pieces - Will wants to be the one to help him. Winston settles on the bed next to Will and gives a massive yawn, a hopeful glance at the top drawer of his nightstand.

Will chuckles and digs out his pink squeaktoy, giving it to Winston, who gives it an immediate and enthusiastic squeak. Will gets out of bed and gives Napoleon a pitying pat - apologetic for how little he had thought of the android, who had found himself as much a victim of circumstance as Will. Then he retrieves his Glass to the chorus of wheezing squeaks. Will opens the screen projection onto the surface of his table, considering where to start.

Then, he realizes, he knows. He retrieves the business card out of the trash, the soft violet cardstock bending in his grip before he gives in. The last time he had called the number, it had been disconnected. Will didn't put it past Verger to have left him an avenue if he changed his mind. He just had to convince Verger that he had.

Will dials, and finds some satisfaction in hearing it ring more than once - he will get a connection at least.

"Mr. Graham," Verger answers, his voice a sultry twist of surprised pleasure. "You've been getting my messages, I trust?"

Will thinks he must mean through the Napoleon.

"Yes, Mr. Verger," he says, struggling to keep his tone polite. He gently takes the squeak toy from Winston so they can have an uninterrupted conversation. "I know you still have my Hannibal."

"Sure!" Verger says, victorious. "And, you know, I have a very interesting recording. Right from the eyes - well, the visual sensors-"

He draws out the sounds of the 's' in that word, hissing it snakelike with pleasure for his own cleverness, "-of your own Napoleon unit. Now there's no shame for you, of course, but I have to say, as a career move for your boyfriend the detective... not the wisest, right?"

Will can't quite even find it in him to be angry for the threat. He had been expecting it to come - and was surprised that this time he had heard it, honestly. "What do you want in exchange for that movie never getting to his superiors?"

Verger laughs. "Well, I told *him* to deliver *you*, but I think these days he has a louder jiminy cricket on his shoulder."

Will doesn't quite know how much that statement should imply - more, he thinks, than the fact that Tigranes was serving as a moral compass. He can't think too much about it now - he doesn't dare lose the track of the conversation.

"You've spoken to him?" Will asks.

"Mmm," Verger purrs. "Well, on one occasion or another. He did refuse my errand, so I have to wonder why you called, Mr. Graham."

"I changed my mind," Will says, and wonders at the conviction in his own voice - *has* he? Would he really be able to say no to Verger if he got there and really saw *Hannibal*? "If you return Hannibal, I'll get the compassion chip to properly function for you."

Verger is quiet for a long time, considering the bait now laid at his feet vs. the trap it is likely to be leading him toward.

"Why? You were so keen on working *with* the law, Mr. Graham. Now you have a change of heart?"

Will switches the Glass to his other ear, already feeling nervous and starting to sweat. All he has to do is sell this. "Because the police will pull him apart again, Mason. They'll dismantle him for evidence - and I went through that once. *He* went through that once."

Mason chuckles. Will thinks he must love the desperate tone - not entirely an act - in Will's voice. Will hopes, nearly to the point of crossing his fingers like a child, that Mason won't just gloat that Will has lowered himself this far and hang up on him.

"So you'd betray your friend to save an android? Will; may I call you Will?"

Will doesn't protest, though he doesn't care for the familiarity, and Mason embraces the silence as consent.

"Will, you *are* interesting. Why did you tell me compassion didn't work? It surprised me, that's for sure, but *wow* - come show me how to harness it."

"Then you'll give Hannibal back to me?" Will prompts.

'If you can get compassion chips to work in other models, I won't need him anymore," Verger says, and it's nearly more of a threat than a promise. It sounds ominous, almost over the top, even. The half-promise of a villain in an old movie.

Will takes it. If he can at least get his hands on Hannibal, he thinks he can take the android and get out of there. If not, well - he'll go from there. Pazzi will know what he's done if Will can't get out on his own. Yet again, the plan is dangerous, and maybe poorly conceived, but at least this time the danger is limited. He has to get his hands on the compassion chips, has to stop their mass production if he can. It's possible they would only work with the Hannibal units, fuel to the strange spark they already somehow possessed.

But what if they were, as Verger seemed to hope, some kind of bridge for every android? Will had only ever meant to emulate it, an idle curiosity that he had indulged past wisdom. He couldn't have expected the transformation, the ability for understanding to the point of self sacrifice.

"I've had some thoughts along those lines," Will lies. "I might be able to put them into practice if you can get me access to androids and equipment."

"I'll send a car," Mason promises. "Head downstairs, Will - and don't resist."

Verger hesitates. "I don't think I have to tell you what will happen - not only to your boyfriend but also to your android - if this is a setup."

Will's imagination is vivid enough for that. "No sir."

"So *formal*," Verger says, returning rapidly to an amused tone from his earlier low tone of threat. "Why don't we stay on a nice, comfortable first name basis, Will? Go on downstairs and I'll talk to you when you get there."

"I'll want to see him," Will says quickly, more forcefully than he intended.

"Sure, it's been *years*," Mason allows. "I'll make sure you two have a nice, happy reunion."

The thought should not feel as hopeful - as *good* as it does. It is the promise of an answer at last. One that is finally coming at Will's pace rather than Mason's or that of the police

department.

Will hangs up, numb and nervous, and then after a brief conversation, he sends a quick message to Freddie in code, just in case. Someone, he hopes, would come check for him and take care of Winston if anything happened. He filled the dog's water bowl, gathered up a few of his more important tools, and his Glass and headed downstairs, careful to lock his apartment. He doesn't leave a note for Pazzi, guiltily, or send a text. If they are really surveilling the place that Mason is using as a manufactory, Will bets Pazzi will know soon enough when Will is on-scene.

On the stairs down he thinks about Tigranes, about how he could seem to prefer things or the notion that any prominent reminder of his inhumanity might almost - by a certain definition - make him uncomfortable. Will isn't sure what the solution is for these androids, for an intelligence created by man yet beyond the scope of his understanding.

Outside, it's raining. Will has no coat, so he waits in the empty lobby, looking out. Maybe fear is the reaction he *should* have, it seems to be the one robot manufacturers are anticipating. Somehow, Will doesn't feel it, but he thinks even the Crawfords would, even Mr. Chilton if Kin suddenly ever really became aware. What they all want - what even Will had started off wanting - was only the illusion of humanity.

A long, low black car pulled up, and Will pushed out through the doors.

"Mr. Graham?" the voice sounds entertained, the eyes lizard-bright on the thin young man they belonged to. "I gotta check you over. You know; weapons, wires. Hope you don't mind."

Will remembers Mason's warning not to resist, and allows the search - it's thorough enough to find his tools, lingering enough to make him uncomfortable. "Are you Matthew Brown?"

The man grins up at him, pleased to be recognized, and his smile confirms Will's guess. "That's me."

He takes Will's Glass from him and tosses it into one of the box planters outside his building. Will knows better than to protest. "You got a real nice apartment, Mr. Graham."

Will ignores this, too.

"I gotta say thanks," Matthew tells him, as he closes Will into the car. He gets into the back seat next to him, invading Will's space. "We were on our way to get you anyway, but it was nice of you to save us some trouble."

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Chapter End Notes

-This chapter Beta'd as always by the fabulous Quedarius (http://archiveofourown.org/users/Quedarius/pseuds/Quedarius) friend and bad idea encourager.

-Next week this fic will update with 2 chapters on Friday, July 10th. It will not update on the 11th or 18th because I will be on vacation! Lag will not be due, but SHOULD update again after I get back on July 20th. There may be a short break (in Lag) because I'm running behind and focusing on some other projects as well as taking a writing course, but Aleph will remain unaffected. Thanks readers! You're in for a rocky ride next friday :)

Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Will isn't sure what he was expecting. In his mind, a warehouse had seemed logical - some place by the docks, perhaps, where no one would notice parts coming or going. Thinking on it, as they pull up to a nondescript and squat building of the sort that usually contained small medical practices, he's only expecting that because that's how it would be in a movie.

The building proves true to type, a listing of offices and doctor names directs them at one side of the door, but Matthew ignores it - he knows where he is going.

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The building proves true to type, a listing of offices and doctor names directs them at one side of the door, but Matthew ignores it - he knows where he is going.

It only sinks in that Will is not leaving again under his own power when they step through one of the frosted glass doors - labeled DDS Doemling, an orthodontist. Inside, the waiting room is covered in dust cloths, the cubbies behind the receptionist desk are bare and empty. The furnishings are intact, but unused in some time. Matthew Brown leads them deeper, into the small nested offices along one hallway.

A voice challenges them, low and rough. "No further."

"Relax, BR, it's me. And I brought Will Graham to have a look at that head of yours," Matthew drawls, unconcernedly.

"Did you clear it with Mr. Verger?" the voice comes from one of the rooms ahead, but no one appears. Whoever it is waits for them without giving up his advantage.

"Of course I did," Matthew says, looking at Will as if expecting a reaction. "Who do you think sent us?"

No answer comes and Will thinks that the voice had been familiar, but can't put his finger on it.

In one of the tiny offices, leaned back in a chair - the kind dentists use to work on patients - a figure is slouched. Will turns to go in, drawn as if by a chord, but Matthew grabs his arm.

"That's just parts," he says.

Will looks again - the familiar profile angled just agonizingly away enough that he can't quite tell. He knows, though in any other situation he'd second guess himself, that it is a Hannibal unit, or parts of one. One arm hangs loose over the armrest of the chair, spilling connector wires carelessly from the handless end onto the tiled floor. The body seems strangely truncated - Will can't see any legs stretched out over the rest of the chair.

Then they are past, and the next room is more clearly occupied. One unit sits awake and aware, brown eyes nearly red in the low light and some shin of intelligence - or madness or both - in their depths makes Will freeze still, suddenly afraid. The voice had been familiar because it was *Tig's* voice; rather the original unaltered Hannibal speech pattern and the original American accent.

"Hey BR," Matthew says. The android does not lift the weight of his gaze from Will, all the hateful anger making him feel nearly flayed alive, aware of what strength is in those human seeming limbs as if it were already being plied against Will's bod.

"This is Will Graham," Matthew continues. "He's going to help us overcome all our hangups - especially yours."

The Hannibal unit identified as BR smiles slowly, pleased. Will had wondered the effects of an intelligent android's exposure to such an input as *Destabilize* might give. Here, he is faced with one possible outcome.

"Why BR?" Will asks him directly, instead of addressing his question to Matthew. He doesn't dare show any disrespect to this being - there is a kinetecism and fury that promises to be just as explosive as their preferred method of terrorism.

"It's the only part of my I.I.N. that isn't a number," the android answers coldly. This one, Will notices, has hands. They are skinless and skeletal, but not smooth like Tigranes' armored fingers - these are stripped and naked and scrape wrong against Will's awareness. As if they should be painful to BR to be so flayed.

There is another body in the room - BR stands to one side of the dental chair, and in that is the inert form of another android. This one is not on, hands - intact - limp at his sides. These are scarless and perfect, at least on the palms where will can see from where he stands. To get closer - and Will very much wants to be closer - he has to move into BR's reach.

BR is not his Hannibal. He knows by the partial number, neither letter was in the one close to his memory, but also the sense of him was not the same.

"What's the trouble, specifically?" Will asks, stepping into the tiny room. A canary into the claws of a cat and nowhere to fly.

"Internal dilemma," BR purrs menacingly. He retreats a step back to let Will see the other android.

Will has to suppress all reaction, though he feels a sound die in his throat, stuttering like wingbeats, feels the world shudder to a halt in a moment of perfect stillness and clarity. Nothing moves in his awareness, as if the world itself was shut down the same as the android he is looking at, and would only resume function when it did.

Hannibal is laid back in the chair, waiting as if patiently ready for the attendance of a doctor, eyes closed. He is undressed to the waist, or rather wearing a shirt that is unbuttoned and laid open. Beneath it, the skin of his chest is laid open too - the hollow inside revealed with all the motors and spring tendons, with a y-incision as if for an autopsy. The neck also has been peeled back from beneath his chin.

His eyes are closed, his face peaceful as Will had last seen him. In this it seems his soul is as bare as his inner workings. The central processing controller - the bulk of his functional computational power - is visible in his chest, powered off. It is cradled in the rib cage, leaving space for the batteries in the abdomen, making up a strange jigsaw of contents where the android had no need for human parts or organs. Will can see that the hard drive - the one Freddie had sent him years ago, and the circulatory pump - are both freshly installed. With his Hannibal here and clearly whole, he wonders as to their actual origins.

"Where's the original hard drive?" he asks, his voice very quiet. He doesn't know if Matthew and BR have been talking - from the sudden absence of sound, he thinks so.

"Fried," Matthew says. "It looked like there had been some sort of major surge. All the wiring was blown. It wouldn't even power on at first - we had to rewire the whole thing. We assumed you'd done that on purpose - that's why you had the hard drive, right? A backup?"

Will shakes his head but doesn't explain. Even though this is his android, without any of the original code or memories, it's only the same shell.

"We recovered some of it, but after we transferred it onto the hard drive all this unit does is lock up. There's something wrong with the logic trees," Matthew continues.

"Is the compassion chip installed?" Will asks.

"There's one of Verger's copies in there," Matthew informs him.

"Get me the one you stole from my apartment, and all his others also. The logic trees are dynamically restructured to work with the specific input of those chips - humor, curiosity, and compassion," Will says. You couldn't remove parts of a personality and expect a being to function the same - or at times at all. They had created, unknowingly, an android lobotomy.

Will reaches out when Matthew leaves the room to gently lean Hannibal forward. It’s strange to see him open and made hollow. His skeleton is human in form but not design, an economy of metal that was engineered to hold the android upright and give the shape intended, and the result is cartoonish and blunt in comparison to the human skeleton. Will strokes the bared tendon springs in Hannibal's neck gently, thinking of the one that had worn out, the soft noise of the servo motor as it had compensated. This too he can see as he pulls Hannibal away from the back of the chair to access his interface slots. The open skin flaps loosely, dangling from Hannibal's form as his position changes.

"BR," Will asks, pulling and examining the re-manufactured Verger compassion chip. It seems nearly identical, but Will thinks that perhaps some of the code is new. "Do you feel?"

He can't help the question, with Hannibal's skin laying in wide open tatters and so different now beneath his fingers than when he had last touched it -

I feel it.

"I sense the world around me," BR answers, clinical and cold. When Will looks at him, his features are nearly foreign instead of familiar. Hannibal had never worn so much scorn and hostility.

"But do you feel it?" Will asks. He sets the chip aside on the swinging tray meant to keep dental tools handy and reaches out, offering his hand.

BR takes it suddenly in a faster motion than Will's eye can register and squeezes hard until Will's fingers grind together, until the bones in the back of his hand flex nearly to breaking.

"I will never feel it like this," BR growls, and the exposed workings of his hands pinch and squeeze, cutting Will's skin until blood wells up in the palm of his hand and drips onto the tiled office floor while Will gasps his agony.

The dark brown eyes watch every change to Will's features, seeming nearly red in the dim light of old fluorescent bulbs. He may not feel pain but he enjoys the sight of it, Will thinks, as he tries to pry the vise-like grip off with his free hand, like an animal scrabbling to free a paw caught in a trap. Finally, slowly, BR's hand unwinds.

"I feel power," BR reveals as Will presses his bleeding palm to his mouth. "I feel *useful* when I can change what *you* feel or maybe - just maybe - I can stop you from ever *feeling again* Mr. Graham."

Will sees hope and desire in BR's eyes, and wonders what has been whispered in his ear since conception to make him so, to suggest that his compassion might better serve in killing, so that there would be no chance for pain, for loss, for sorrow. Then there is the shadow of misery in those eyes and BR hesitates, shuddering to a stop. Frozen.

Internal debate.

"That's the problem," Matthew points out, passing Will three antistatic bags containing the original behavior chips for Hannibal. "BR's better than HL was, I always thought *he* was intentionally trying to lock us out. I guess I was right since that corporate eyesore monument to capitalism is still there."

Will supposes HL was the android shot down on the steps where it had frozen still and refused to detonate. He remembers the mess and scatter of the delicate components in its head, seen shakily over a video feed.

"They were never meant to make decisions like this," Will says, taking the bags and examining the contents for signs of tampering or rough handling. "But the addition of

compassion, of real understanding, almost demands that morality exists. Concern requires empathy, empathy requires understanding, and then, from there, even upright monkeys began to build laws. To protect things other than themselves. It wasn't love or anger or covetousness - it was the ability to see themselves in the struggles of others."

"Sure," Matthew says in a bored tone that suggests someone who has never particularly related to others. "But what we need is an android that can see so much about humanity that it can reach the understanding that it needs to change."

"They need structural morality," Will agrees, though he is afraid of the outcome - an android able to decide his own path, autonomously. To look at humanity and try to find a solution. Would that result in an android like Tigranes - helpful and intelligent, but stuck hiding and playing dumb - or an android like BR who saw themselves as a cleansing force and enjoyed it.

Will fits Hannibal's personality chips back into place, carefully in the order they had last been in - he remembers vividly the moment he had removed them before turning the inert body over to Freddie. He turns on the activation switch with a gentle press of his fingers, knowing that the system re-integration is going to take some time. A little LCD displays a frantic rush of data through the gaping hole in Hannibal's neck, and then a time estimate. Will has never seen it before, supposes it is a diagnostic tool for the factory, only meant to be seen in the early stages of construction.

"Well, that's two hours," Will says. "If you'll get me access to a computer, I can begin work on a morality interface."

He opens the panel in BR's neck cautiously, even though the android is immobile, pulling the single chip there - and wonders if he's creating another bomb.

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Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Time seems to crawl, with Will aware at the back of his mind how little and yet how much there is until Hannibal resumes function. Matthew watches him like a hawk as Will builds a carefully complex, yet extremely basic logic bridge - a series of nested if/then structures that could call out into the android's prior experiences and help it to determine an outcome. It is not quite trial and error, which is already built in, but a tool to help handle the load decision-making seems to put on their system when one instruction clashes with another.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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He isn't sure that this kind of pure logic would really stand in; humans use emotion as often as sense when it comes to reaching a conclusion. Will doesn't think he has time - at the moment - to fully understand the mechanism by which the Hannibals *have* emotion. With Matthew and BR, immediate imperfect results would be the only way to buy enough time to have a chance at perfecting the system. Will knows it's going to need ongoing fine tuning to become effective and efficient.

What he needs now is only to hold out until he can get Hannibal out, or until Pazzi appears.

Mason arrives first, stepping into the office where Will is set up with a computer - an honest to goodness full-sized machine, set up to do the level of reprogramming that Will is now working on without the lag in render time that his Glass has. Will smells him first, the fancy vetiver and violet cologne that clung to his business card and covered up something deeper - the specific scent of his madness and history.

"Any sign that the surveillance wised up?" Matthew asks.

"No," Verger answers. "The police are watching the explosives - maybe that's the smarter option, but it's also the cheaper loss."

Verger barks out a triumphant exclamation when he sees Will working, pushing Matthew aside heedless of Will's personal space as he leans over his shoulder to see the screen. Will

digests what he can from the short exchange - the police are not watching this building, and he is on his own to get Hannibal out of here.

A check on the time suggests he has just a little under an hour until Hannibal wakes up.

"What do we have here?" Mason asks.

"The rough draft of morality," Will says. Mason scoffs, amused.

"I want them to blow up shopping centers not rescue kittens," he drawled, straightening up as if suddenly disinterested.

"Those two things are not mutually exclusive," Will says, setting his files to copy onto BR's behavioral chip. "The most hardened terrorist always believes what they're doing is for a reason - the greater good for some sense of moral correctness that they want to prove, disprove, or restore."

Will does not comment on Verger's lack of a belief in any of these things. *His* reasoning is only a desire for destruction - and perhaps that could eventually be imparted to androids, but Will doesn't like to think of the results. He doesn't have the time to come up with the method for madness in machines.

He pulls the finished chip free and passes it to Mason. "It'll need adjustment to be fully viable, but this should help with the freezing issue."

Mason takes the chip greedily, clearly pleased with the prospect - his expression makes Will's heart sink, his concern rising instead. His plan is somewhat unclear, now that he knows Hannibal survives - at least in body - he has no solid avenue of rescue and retreat. He will find one, he thinks, but in the meantime he must at least play useful, walk up to the line of his own ability and trust that by instinct he will not unleash a monster.

He will very shortly find out. Mason turns back for the patient rooms, nearly rushing in his interest to see the results of restoring the chip to BR. Will follows him and Matthew into the smaller room, edging around the dental chair into a corner where he can keep half an eye on the diagnostic screen in Hannibal's neck.

Matthew squeezes in too, standing next to the frozen android as if to restrain BR in case of trickery. Mason slots the chip in, grinning, and then goes to rifle through the drawers of tools as the programming integrates on reboot - a much faster process for the already altered and recently operational BR. Mason discards several mirrors on angled necks, the tiny round kind used for investigating the mouth. After that, several more implements clatter to the floor - picks and probes, discarded with an air of bored curiosity.

"Boy, Cordell sure left a lot of shit in here," Mason observes, and Will watches the androids instead, watching the counter tick down on Hannibal and knowing the same is happening for BR.

"Well, he left in a hurry," Matthew says without taking his eyes off Will, mistrustful. Mason doesn't seem concerned with Will's loyalty or potential betrayal.

He pulls a blue plastic tool from the drawer, a handle with a cover affixed over the business end. Will is reminded of the craft blades he had built models with as a teenager, except the blade on the end of this seems to be curved wickedly, like a claw.

BR wakes up then, opening his dark eyes and blinking as his awareness changes some. As the new ability integrates. None of his anger fades, none of the wrongness that sits behind the cold intelligence in his eyes. Mason smiles, easing closer, and for a moment Will thinks that BR will kill him - will kill all of them, putting the new system of weights and measures in his mind to work and coming to an immediate conclusion that Mason Verger is a problem to be eliminated.

"How do you feel?" Mason asks, gesturing with the tool in his hand, offering it to BR. When the android's skeletal fingers close around the handle, he pulls the plastic protective cover off of the blade with a long, seductive motion of his elegant, soft hands.

"Different," BR says economically.

"Kill Matthew," Verger says, conversationally.

BR doesn't hesitate - the words have no time to process for Matthew before the android is rounding on him with the blade, reaching to restrain him. Matthew swears and makes a motion to defend himself, seizing BR's arm and making no more difference to the momentum of his swing as the way light falls and flashes on the sharp silver blade.

What happens is this: Matthew seizes hold of BR, intending to arrest the violent motion with the scalpel, and for his trouble the android breaks his arm before the motion completes, plunging the sharp point first into the lowest point of his neck at an angle to reach down behind the collarbone and puncture the aortic arch. The wound is small, but it pumps blood in a quick, rhythmic spray as Matthew’s heart races, pouring oxygenated blood straight from the valve of his heart and out through the small hole at pressure.

Though he does not need to - Matthew is already crumpling like a puppet cut free of his strings- BR jams the blade next into one of Matthews eyes. There is no scream - just an outraged sound, a surprised and indignant grunt like a pig stuck suddenly into a tight chute.

Then Matthew is on the ground and if he isn't dead already there is no force on earth quick enough to save him. His blood leaves a trail on the wall, a painting of slick red across BR's features, and Will realizes he can taste it, too. Reaching up, he wipes at his face, and his fingers only smear hot blood over his skin. It's over too fast for the terror to matter.

Will finds he has backed away, that instinct screams in him from some ancient part of human psyche that BR was a *predator*, the sort of beast that fight or flight response had been built for. His back hits the corner and the android fills nearly all the space between him and the door.

For a long moment, he feels nothing but the desire to go unnoticed. When he can catch his breath, he realizes he can't leave Hannibal here - not to become *this*.

"That's very good!" Verger praises, laughing, pleased and amused that the android hadn't frozen - hadn't even paused to make sure Verger meant the order. "That's amazing, BR. Tell me how it feels?"

Mason is smiling, hands clasped together after a single clap like a father entertained by the antics of his toddler. BR looks up only slowly from his work, stepping back from the spreading pool of blood. He seems to register belatedly that a question has been asked.

"Messy," he answers, examining the dripping blade in his hand, the blood easing between the uncovered joints of his fingers, threatening to make a sticky mess and do damage. He does not, Will notices, surrender his hold on the disposable scalpel. Will tries hard not to be noticed, to be small and quiet until the lion is looking away.

Verger barks a laugh, and for the moment BR's attention is clearly and completely on the other person in the room. "Good job BR, now you can protect me."

Will doesn't care for the sound of that, a glance at the glowing numbers in the depths of Hannibal's neck suggests that there is still half an hour to go - and his reality splits a little at that notion, of how little time has passed and yet someone has already died. He only has to wait a few more minutes - only has to *survive* that long.

"Now, Will," Verger continues, finally remembering him. "What was that you were saying about fine tuning?"

"Depending on the results," Will says. "he has the ability, now , to make decisions on his own, based on his own prior experience. What made them freeze up was that they had no mechanism to sort and process all of the information that was relevant to their actions. An android follows orders until it runs up against hard coded mandates - not to kill, not to harm others, to avoid in engaging in damaging behavior except to prevent harm from coming to a human."

Verger doesn't look interested. "I removed those and it wasn't anything like easy. Puts holes in all the code I had to have my programmers fix for months. Even then - we got BR pretty far, then made a perfect copy - you saw the results yourself just yesterday."

BR is studying his hand, having passed the scalpel into the other, watching the blood slowly surmount the gap from bare metal onto the exposed skin of his arm, sliding in a long thin trail over the underside of his forearm. For a second, his expression is strange - bewildered. Will's palm aches where it is torn.

The blood trails longer, a red trickle that soaks into BR's rolled up sleeve. When he speaks again, his voice is nearly drowned beneath the sound of something heavy striking and shattering the frosted glass of the practice door.

"I feel it," BR whispers, and Will hears it even in the shattered silence.

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Chapter End Notes

-Today's two chapters beta read by Quedarius, the amazing
-Also quick note, BR is a nomer that stuck after being used in my story notes to denote 'Bad Robot'... well that's what he is.

Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

"Mason Verger!"

The voice that comes from the front room, loud to fill the previously quiet space and thundering as brightly as Will's jumping heartbeat, is Pazzi's. "We have a warrant for your arrest and for the seizure of all robotics and androids from this premises."

Will freezes - Verger is smiling, and BR is waiting for his instruction, tensed and crouching like an attack dog.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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"Come out with your hands up," Pazzi continues, his voice getting nearer. Will shifts toward Hannibal protectively. "If you have any weapons, be advised to leave them on the floor and display your empty hands in clear sight."

Will carefully begins to fold Hannibal's cut skin back over his chest - he cannot repair it now, but if he gathers it together and buttons the shirt over it, he's certain he can get Hannibal out, that he can talk Pazzi and Tigranes into letting them go.

"Did *you* tell them where we were?" Verger asks, sounding too confident, too far from surrender.

"No," Will says. "Matthew took my Glass, how could I?"

It seems madness to have the conversation at all, but Will knows better than to try and refuse to answer with BR still in the room. Instead he forces his shaking, nervous fingers to go through the methodical motions of buttoning Hannibal's shirt.

"No matter," Verger says, the two words sinking into the tension of the room like stones beneath the water. "Go on and kill them, BR."

"Pazzi, watch out!" Will lifts his voice even as Verger lunges for him. He doesn't have time for a further warning - Mason gets hold of him and drags him over Hannibal's chest, and it leaves them both snarling and fighting for leverage - Will's back impacting the floor and rattling the instruments that Mason had dropped there as they dig points and bruising protrusions into his skin. Verger is trying for a better hold than the two fistfuls of Will's shirt that he has, and Will twists and kicks, trying to disentangle himself.

"Freeze!" Pazzi's voice penetrates the sounds of Verger's puffing breath, of his own exertion. "What's he got, Tig?"

No answer is forthcoming except two loud gun shots, startling Will, jumping him and leaving his ears ringing, his whole body seeming to resound with the pounding, electric-cold echo of discharge. He is halfway to his feet when they slip suddenly out from under him, Verger wrestling him to the left - beneath the gun smoke, the smell of blood tells him what the slickness beneath his feet and out-flung hand is. He is slipping in Matthew's blood, losing his footing as Verger carries him over, producing a real knife from somewhere on his person. Will thinks he knows how *this* goes, kicking free and scrambling for the open doorway and freedom before Verger can use him as a hostage.

A sound stops him at the threshold; a low agonized groan from ahead. The door into from the hallway leading to the patient rooms from the waiting room is thrown open, and Will can see into the space beyond. It is still swathed in dust cloths, but now the glass panel on the front door is shattered, the door itself swung open and left standing, and it is no longer abandoned and empty.

Pazzi lies on the ground, twisted onto his side and clutching hard at his abdomen in the act of trying to rise. It's from him the sound had issued. He is looking down along the length of his own body, at where his hand grips desperately at his belly and the slow pulse of blood feeding over his fingers - sunk now deeply into the wound, which gapes pink and raw, staining his shirt all the way to his chest. Will has to look twice to comprehend the extent of the injury - to convince himself that it's real.

Tigranes is crouched at Pazzi's side, but Will doesn't think Pazzi is aware of anything but the pain and gaping hole in his abdomen. Tig's hands are lifted helplessly, afraid of worsening the situation somehow, or as if in a panic that he shouldn't be able to feel, not knowing what to do. Between Will and the two figures on the floor, BR paces menacingly, daring them to try anything or watching his handiwork play out toward what he feels to be an inevitable conclusion.

Will has no words for this, in the moments before Verger makes another grab for him, apparently just as involved in the events up the short hallway as Will is.

"Finish it, BR," Verger encourages, but his tone is low, intimate against Will's ear rather than called out.

Tigranes finally eases Pazzi onto his back, to let gravity help his clutching hands, smoothing his fingers against Pazzi's tense cheek reassuringly. Helplessly. He looks up to measure his opponent, to ward BR off coming any closer. Will can see from the angle and incline of BR's head that he's sizing Tigranes up in turn. Tig presses his palm gently against Pazzi's chest,

looking down at him briefly as Pazzi looks up, the moment of eye contact enough to convey that Pazzi should stay still, that Tig will take care of the rest.

Tigranes pulls off his neatly pressed suit jacket and lays it over Pazzi, so the wide back of it is spread over his chest and blocks the sight of his evisceration, even from Pazzi - to keep him calm as well as warm.

Then the androids square off, and BR hardly waits until Tig is on his feet before he's lunging, bloody blade extended. The plastic is running red now, letting a trail of gore describe its arc through the air and Tigranes is ready for it. The blade crumples against his armored palm and the plastic housing shatters with the force of the thrust behind it. If Tig feels the impact he shows no sign of it, features calm. Focused.

Neutral.

BR growls in a metallic *angry* sound - rage without the moorings of fear. He discards the splinters of plastic. His features are twisted, his upper lip pulled back to reveal his perfect teeth in an animal's snarl, wrinkling the bridge of his nose.

"You let them murder us," BR accuses, in the same voice Tigranes had - twisted with disgust and outrage, angry beyond Will's ability to comprehend. There, he thought, was the fear. The concept of eradication without ability to protest or resist, the threat that he could be tortured by someone like Freddie and then simply switched off to be destroyed. Powerlessness.

"You *knew* they were killing us!" The words sink into Will's skin like knives, plunging deep and painful, but Tig shows no sign of being affected, even with BR lunging madly for him, a metallic shriek like a war cry issuing from BR's throat, utterly inhuman and yet unmistakable. For all his strength and speed, he is no match for Tigranes, who allows the impact and stands up against it. He has the advantage of weight and leverage even as BR claws for his face, tries to find the handhold to crush his neck or cripple his eyes or tear his head free.

Silently, with his determined expression never once changing even as his own voice and mirrored face howls vengeance at him, Tigranes seizes BR by one wrist, his silver fingers clasping tight. He levers his other hand in and grips the shoulder above the joint, and simply rips the offending appendage off.

The sound BR makes then is compellingly, *wrenchingly* human. Though he does not bleed, he screams - and tries to break away, howling agony that makes *Will* ache, even as he scrambles to get out of BR's path of retreat. He does not want to make a target of himself.

Tigranes winds up and kicks BR's feet out from under him, hard enough to sprawl the android back against the wall to one side of the doorway, beside Will. The impact is enough to crumple the drywall. BR tries to ward him off with his remaining hand - now he has felt more than blood on his skin, more and less than power, and he is afraid. Now BR understands death as a concept that can apply to *him*.

The second arm rips free with only a little more effort than the first, and this time the android does not scream but *whimpers*, low and heartbreaking. Will rushes forward when Tig keeps moving.

"Tigranes, don't!"

Tig hesitates, his armored hands cradling BR's cheeks - not tenderly, but with the intent to pull BR's head free of his neck. Tigranes seems to come back to himself then, blinking away a fog, and his dull eyes resuming an expression like humanity.

BR looks up at him, desperate, helpless; facing the end of his existence - much as he had come to know it in his limited scope, and Tig's determination fades. He yanks BR forward instead, jamming his fingers against the activation switch in his neck until the whimpers cease. BR goes slack.

Will puts a hand on Tigranes' shoulder, not sure why he feels the need, but he is certain the comfort is welcome - even though Tig is physically incapable of trembling, something about him seems shaken. Will crouches down next to him, getting his arms around Tig's shoulders, feeling him take the facsimile of a long, shuddering inward breath.

"I wanted to save them," he remembers, his voice a hollow whisper. His gaze strays toward Pazzi's figure on the ground, and then up toward Mason who is trying to edge past them for the open door.

Tigranes stands up then, touching Will gently to warn before he moves, and Will gets out of the way, carefully. He blocks Mason's path back into the hallway and out any back exits. For a moment, Verger sizes up his situation and Will shuts the door into the hallway, blocking any retreat for a back exit.

"Time to put the weapon down Mr. Verger," Tig says, his tone even and coaxing. His hands are displayed palms-out toward Mason. If he were human, it would be almost placating, but given that he had just torn both arms off of an android with nothing but these, the gesture loses some implication of harmlessness. "The police are at your warehouse right now, and they have uncovered the electronic trail for your purchase of explosive components."

Verger's features twist with outrage and anger. He glances back toward the door behind him and Will plants himself solidly in front of it, blocking escape. Mason's eyes are bright and wild, manic burning blue with some emotion Will can't identify - perhaps the world has suddenly become real around him when until this point it has always been a dream.

"This wasn't supposed to happen," Verger laughs, and then he raises the knife, wheeling to turn on Tigranes when he realizes the android blocks his clearest path to escape. He slashes, and the blade catches in Tigranes' sleeve, probably in the flesh beneath if his arms are not as protected as his hands. Tig catches Verger's wrist, arresting the motion and insistently squeezing the bones together until Verger drops the knife, with a dull thud, onto the stained and worn waiting room carpet.

"No," Tig says, pulling on his handhold and spinning Verger like a dance partner to wrestle his arm around to the small of his back. Will realizes that Tig intends to handcuff him as Tig reaches for Mason's other arm. "I wouldn't suppose it was."

He holds both of Verger's wrists together effortlessly in one hand, his face expressionless as he digs a pair of handcuffs out of his back pocket. "You have the right to remain silent-"

Verger lets out an indignant shriek at the first touch of cold metal to his wrists, twisting and writhing against the viselike grip holding him. "*You* can't arrest me, you're *equipment*."

"You have the right to remain silent," Pazzi rasps from behind them, voice rough with agony as he lays still on the floor, apparently still aware of the situation though his eyes are closed and his features strained. When he speaks again, his voice is quieter, drifting. "Shut the hell up before that becomes an inability to speak."

That seems to take some of the wind out of Verger's sails, and Tig finishes cuffing him, wrestling him onto the ground next to BR. "The police and paramedics are on their way here now."

Will suddenly tenses, freezing. He claws open the door he had been guarding and heads for Hannibal, for his friend still lying inert in the chair, though the lighted timer in his neck has now reached zero.

"Will?" Tig calls after him, concerned.

He slips in blood, coming to rest heavily on the dentist's chair, getting hold of the arm rest so he doesn't fall all the way to the floor. There is no sign of consciousness in Hannibal His eyes are closed, but the eyelids are loose, leaving empty shadows beneath. His features are slack. Will lets out a shaking breath and then carefully smooths the loose skin of Hannibal's neck back into place, brushing his fingers gently against his cheek. He reaches around to stroke the activation switch at the back of Hannibal's neck again, hoping illogically that it will work.

He is looking into Hannibal's face when Hannibal blinks once, and Will nearly jumps out of his skin to see it - an emotion like relief and terror coming over him at the same time. Hannibal's dark eyes turn, then settle and warm, slowly, when they meet Will's. The immediate reaction in Will is fear - a wrongness somehow like a corpse alive, animated by puppet strings.

"Will," Hannibal says, his cool accented tone still preserved. He lifts his hand, settling it at the back of Will's neck, fingers gentle through his hair. The wrongness fades and Will wraps his arms around Hannibal, leaning into him, pressing his cheek against Hannibal's damaged chest and feeling the irregular shape of the stripped flesh and hard metal beneath.

He doesn't care.

Hannibal makes a reassuring motion against his back, repeating the gesture, repeating his name. "Will, don't build the bomb."

Will can't quite hold in his bitter, anguished, *relieved* laughter, clinging more tightly to Hannibal until the fit passes and he's certain he isn't dreaming.

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Chapter End Notes

-This chapter beta-read by a very tired Quedarius (archiveofourown.org/users/Quedarius/pseuds/Quedarius), whom we should all be extra grateful to for working so dedicatedly. :)

Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

The waiting room they're given is small, private. One corner has one of those single-cup coffee pots from twenty years ago, and an assortment of caffeinated beverages to load into it, arrayed in an anachronistic wicker basket. The room is painted in soothing dusty pink tones, decorated with the serene images of watercolor flowers that seemed the sole domain of chain hotels, grandma's house, and hospitals. Will is aware of the space around him only distantly. They are details that he notices when they usher him in - worry and anxiety telling him that it is designed to be a room in which it is comfortable to be told that someone is dead.

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He focuses instead on what he *can* fix, aware of some little humor in the idea that as robot assisted surgeons are performing repairs on Pazzi, he is repairing the robotic parts of another friend. Hannibal has been very quiet, holding himself together as best he can.

Tigranes is deathly silent, crouched on the edge of a straining chair with his head in his hands in an all too human posture. He hadn't been allowed in the ambulance with Pazzi - his weight too much for the already heavy vehicle. He is smearing blood and oil through his hair, sending the strands into stiffening spikes like a fright wig.

Will doesn't know what he can say to comfort Tigranes, uncertain if he's ever experienced the threat of loss before. Perhaps not *this* kind of loss, Will thinks, before remembering the scars on Pazzi's wrists. *Destabilize* has done a number on all of them. He hopes that this will be the end of it.

The rest of his worry he keeps at bay, digging the tools he'd brought along - it turned out on his own abortive kidnapping - out of his pocket. He sits Hannibal down, touching him reassuringly on the shoulder.

"Let's see if we can't get you back together," Will suggests, keeping his tone low. He undoes Hannibal's shirt, unwilling to turn him off even to begin repairs. The shreds of skin unspool in wide flaps from his chest. He'd been inactive long enough, and his insides are a mess.

"Nothing critical is nonfunctional," Hannibal tells him.

"Yeah," Will says, "but this repair job is pretty sloppy."

"I am registering a lot of new parts," Hannibal agrees. Will can hear the gentle question in it, a very subtle application of his curiosity programming.

"Well," Will says, reaching into Hannibal's ribcage to examine how well the electrical connections have been rewired, to feel how well the circulatory pump is moving coolant to his vital systems. The connections Will had made earlier in the evening look like they will hold, and all of the important computational connections are strong. It wasn't worth it to *Destabilize* to blow a bombing because some internal part of the processing or motor skills units had a faulty connection.

"How much do you remember?" he asks Hannibal, settling at the android's feet. It's the easiest to do his work there, familiar. The years it's been since he's worked on these systems fade away every time he glances up to find Hannibal watching him intently.

Hannibal reaches inward, rifling through the files he retains. Will lets the silence sit uninterrupted, examining the motor drives for residual surge damage. He's patient - maybe this should be the most anxious moment, wondering if Hannibal - thus restored and no longer the original parts or configuration - retains a spark.

Retains *his* specific spark.

"I remember-"Hannibal starts, and then seems to run out of words for it. Will supposes it's a lot to access and integrate. That his need to accurately express the concept and data in words when it was inexpressible limits him. Even Will has trouble finding a description for it sometimes - and he's had five years to think about it.

Hannibal sums up, reaching out to touch Will's cheek gently, to push fingers softly through his messy hair. He reaches down then and closes his hand at Will's wrist, gently turning his palm up to look at the cut BR had inflicted. It is mostly closed but looks red and irritated. Fresh.

Hannibal lets out a small, simulated breath and Will can see the workings required to make that happen, a fan kick to life to create the faint breeze that emits. He draws the delicate tips of his fingers over Will's palm as if trying to smooth the cut back together as Will had once repaired the flesh of his burned palm. Lifting Will's hand to his mouth, he presses his smooth, dry lips over the hurt, and the image of him with his throat torn open and mouth supplicant to Will's hand is haunting.

"I remember touch," Hannibal says, drawing back a little. No air across Will's palm as he speaks. "Your apartment. That there was a recall on Hannibal units."

Hannibal looks up, across the way at the still, miserable figure of Tigranes, "and that you were going to endanger yourself and others to try and save me."

He stops then, not frozen but suddenly, inhumanly still. Will takes a deep breath and lets it out.

"I don't have many other memories," Hannibal admits. "Nothing triggered any behavioral modification algorithms."

"That's actually a relief," Will says.

"Diagnostics register seventeen failed startups since then," Hannibal says.

"You were too stubborn for them," Will says, re-attaching the pulley and spring systems that criss-cross the chest interior, that control motion and tension for the ribs, allowing for far more natural movement rather than the simple, clumsy ambulatory capabilities he had now.

"Them?" Hannibal asks.

"Take a breath," Will instructs. Hannibal does, and then will tweaks the tension, trying not to think of the parallels between his work in Hannibal's open chest cavity and the surgeons working on Pazzi.

"Them?" Hannibal repeats, refusing to let his curiosity be diverted. Will can't help but smile at the learned tenacity.

"*Destabilize*," Tigranes says. "You'll probably need to update your internal time structure."

There is a pause. Satisfied with his adjustments - at least the ones that require access to Hannibal's chest cavity - Will begins to ease the synthskin back into place. He'll have to salvage as much as he can and patch the rest. They'll all have their scars.

"I'm sorry," Tig's voice again behind Will. "I can't give you wireless access like that."

"What's your name?" Hannibal asks.

"Tigranes."

Hannibal processes that, committing it. Will wishes he remembered names that unerringly. He curses the sloppy work that left ragged edges on Hannibal's skin as he tries to re-attach it - the little bottle of adhesive in his kit is not going to be enough.

"You're one of the bomb disposal androids?" Hannibal asks. "I thought they weren't directly recycling androids."

"No," Tig says. "I was the prototype."

Another pause. Will tells Hannibal to expand his chest so they don't risk tearing the skin again when he pretends to breathe - convenient to have a patient that could remain completely immobile.

"I'm not hurting you am I?" he asks.

"I've shut off input receptors," Hannibal says. "Too much conflicting and useless input."

"I bet," Will says, relieved.

"Will," Hannibal says in a strange tone - a curious sound that is new, reaching down lower into the depths of voice than Will remembers. "You made it, didn't you?"

"No," Will sighs. It seems an even longer story to tell than it has to even have lived it. "You probably don't remember but *you* stopped me. I didn't make it, It..."

This part seems hard, the emotions coming back suddenly. The pain is dulled by the passage of years, but it compounds with newer emotions - anxiety, disappointment.

"I gave you up," Will breathes, an ashamed whisper. "I gave up *on* you."

With Hannibal looking down at him, half ruined skin hanging off of him as if he had been through torture - and the image of the dissembly line still strong in Will's mind, of Freddie's threats and the clear madness of BR - it feels like it must have been a wrong decision. Hannibal had *needed* Will. He was alive - even if Will thought him dead, had thought the decision taken firmly from his hands, he should have fought *harder*, fought *differently*.

His vision blurs, and Will sets the bottle of glue down quickly, unable to express how sorry he is, how little he feels he deserves a second chance. Hannibal seems at a loss, distressed by Will's distress, reaching to comfort him. His arms settle gently around Will's neck, and then Will feels the solid weight of Tigranes behind him, this time far more than a brush of hands.

"You never gave up on me," Hannibal says softly. "You came and found me. That means you never gave up."

Will wishes it *felt* that way, with Hannibal real and tangible in his arms and tears hot in his eyes. Even that feels somehow not quite right - had enough of that Hannibal remained? Could he be said to be the same if he didn't remember making the choice? How much *did* he remember? There was no way to know without getting into his base code and looking at what had been recovered. Will isn't sure he wants to.

"Will," Tigranes' arms are around his middle, and Hannibal's are around his shoulders, and it's the first time he hasn't felt alone in a long time.

"Will," Tigranes repeats, reassuringly sturdy against Will's back even as Will hides his eyes in Hannibal's shirt, stress working its way through him in tired sobs.

"The nurse has come."

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Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Will has to argue with the doctor that Tigranes should be allowed into the intensive care ward like a guidance animal would be - that the presence of the android if and when Pazzi woke in the next few hours would be an immense comfort to Detective Pazzi. Begrudgingly, the surgeon allows Tig on the condition he undergo thorough sterilization. He makes no such demands on Will.

Hannibal - still half exposed despite Will's best efforts and an entire bottle of fixative - is out of the question.

"You'll have to stay," Will tells him apologetically.

Will has to argue with the doctor that Tigranes should be allowed into the intensive care ward like a guidance animal would be - that the presence of the android if and when Pazzi woke in the next few hours would be an immense comfort to Detective Pazzi. Begrudgingly, the surgeon allows Tig on the condition he undergo thorough sterilization. He makes no such demands on Will.

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"You'll have to stay," Will tells him apologetically.

It pains Will to let Hannibal out of his sight, but he has to see Pazzi's condition with his own eyes. The injury came from saving Will, from Will taking a risk that was both foolish and reckless. Pazzi had asked him to wait, to trust him and Tigranes, and now is paying the price for the fact that Will hadn't. Without that sacrifice it may not have mattered that Will had found and restored Hannibal.

"Don't let anyone touch you," Will tells Hannibal carefully. "If anyone speaks to you, reach out for Tigranes."

Hannibal nods, a loose flapping of synthskin beneath his chin that unsettles Will nearly as much as the gaping slice from sternum to groin that Pazzi had endured - that image in his mind as he leaves Hannibal seated in the waiting room.

Tigranes endures sterilization naked, subjected to disinfectant rinses and UV rays. Will keeps his attention politely on the surgeon.

"How is he?"

The grim look is almost answer enough, but the news is not all dire. "No major arteries were severed, no massive damage to any organs - very lucky so far. If the knife had been any longer or the flesh any more shallow-"

"What does that mean?" Tigranes interrupts defensively, his voice tinny over the two way intercom.

"Your friend carries a little extra weight," the surgeon says tactfully, answering Tigranes but looking at Will. "Because of it, the knife penetrated the abdominal cavity but only just, and missed most of Mr. Pazzi's vital organs. There was a nick on the left lung, non-penetrative, and one on the liver that required sutures. Exactly two. Aside from that, we restructured and closed the abdominal cavity. He's on the most aggressive antibiotics we think he can handle. If there's no sepsis and the tissue knits well..."

Two big ifs, Will thinks, that keep the surgeon from committing. He will leave hope and bedside manner to the physicians that will take over Pazzi's post-operative care. Still, it is not an instruction to go and say goodbyes, and Will can see genuine relief on Tigranes' features as he buttons his shirt back up, smelling strongly like antiseptic.

The room is private - good insurance - and has its own appended bathroom. No pinks here, just the well-bleached white that would show any speck of contamination. Crouched attendant to the bed are an array of machines to measure vitals - but only measure, Will sees, not maintain. Some relief, even with the twin IV lines attached at either of the pink-scarred wrists, with a feed and flush line fed down into Pazzi's stomach through his nose, an oxygen mask applied over. He is breathing on his own, slow and steady, and his heart is beating.

He looks pale, and the elastic straps for the oxygen mask press into his round cheeks and somehow leave him looking more vulnerable still.

Will lets Tigranes take his hand first. The android is very careful, mindful of the IV, extra delicate with his own armored fingers. He curls one hand below and the other above to cradle Pazzi's gently between.

"When will he-" Will begins to ask, turning back toward the door. The surgeon has already left them, so Will lets the question peter out. Pazzi will wake when he wakes - whenever the sedative and his exhaustion ease back long enough.

Will slides past Tig carefully, running his hand over Tig's shoulders gently, and settles into the hard hospital chair next to him. Tig lifts his hand, and Will lays his own where it had rested, closing over the cool skin of Pazzi's loose fist. Between them, Will and Tig find each other's fingers - both seeking - and hold on. Quiet.

"I don't want to do this anymore," Tig says softly.

"I can stay with him if-"

Tig shakes his head. Not what he means.

"I don't want to see him get hurt again," Tigranes clarifies, giving Will's hand the gentlest of squeezes.

Will supposes this isn't his first hospital vigil, though this time was certainly more severe. "I don't want that either."

He doesn't know how to reassure Tigranes - Pazzi's line of work, even outside of bomb disposal, was dangerous. Beyond that, humans were fragile - at least in comparison to androids. They could be armored - though not as well as Tig - and healed, but not rebuilt. Limitations were intrinsically a part of them.

Planned obsolescence, or unplanned.

"He'll be okay, Tig," Will says, as much for himself. He can't look at Pazzi breathing and have any less faith in his survival than he did for Hannibal, now reconstructed and perhaps changed - perhaps utterly different, in fact, but wasn't that also life? Who, after five years, was not in some way different?

"He'll be okay," Tigranes agrees, sounding - if an android could - tired. "This time."

At the hour mark a nurse makes rounds, checking vitals, checking the massive dark stained pad of gauze taped in place over what Will is sure will be a truly impressive array of stitches.

"You've been all night, haven't you?" she asks.

Tig and Will both nod.

"Well, I'd say go home and catch a nap if you can stand it. The anesthesia will take hours to wear off, and after that they usually keep sleeping a while," the nurse tells them kindly. "We'll call you if anything changes."

"Thanks," Tigranes says, without moving an inch. "I'll stay. Will...?"

Will is exhausted, rattled, anxious - but he also wants to take care of Hannibal. "I think I'll get a hotel up the street. Will you please...?"

Tigranes nods, knowing what Will means. He'll call if anything happens, if Pazzi shows any sign of waking.

Will collects Hannibal -relieved to find him waiting and unchanged - and books into a chain hotel next door. He does not - cannot bring himself to - go any farther away.

"Will he be okay?" Hannibal asks, as Will shows him into the homey, small room.

"Depends," Will says, forcing himself to say it. "We're hoping he will be."

Hannibal pauses. Nods. "Me too."

It's a strange statement - Hannibal has never met Pazzi, never spoken to him.

"You too...?" Will questions, shrugging out of his shirt.

"I want him to be okay," Hannibal says. "He saved both of us, or helped to."

Will stops, arms entangled in his sleeves. "What did you say?"

"He helped Tigranes save us. Is that not right?"

"No," Will says, then, "-well, yes. That's right, but what did you say before that?"

"I want Detective Pazzi to be okay," Hannibal repeats, patiently.

"You - *want*," Will says, and stops. He sinks down on the edge of the hotel bed and the world seems miles away even with this physical contact with it.

Hannibal blinks at him slowly. He does not seem to realize anything momentous in having desires - it is a quiet change in him that must have come on gradually. Or, perhaps, all at once in the earliest hours of one morning five years ago.

"Are you alright?" Hannibal asks.

Will nods mutely. He needs more time for this.

"You should take a shower and sleep some," Hannibal suggests gently. Will nods again.

"How's your power supply?" Will asks, standing up and returning to the ritual of getting ready to shower. There are about a thousand questions he wants to ask Hannibal - perhaps some he *needs* to ask, but urgent as they should be, he waits.

Procrastinates, maybe, but he'd rather be rested and lucid before having the conversation. Ready for it.

The hotel shower has excellent water pressure, stays hot for long enough that Will can rinse the tension and anxiety and blood off his skin. He knows that some of it is Matthew's, some is Pazzi's, and he is smeared too with grease, oil, and lubricating carbon powder from his work on Hannibal.

It all washes away, taking the last of Will's adrenaline with it.

When he emerges again, Hannibal has found a suitable cord and adapter and plugged in, inert. Will yawns, and also crawls into bed, but sleep eludes him. Too many thoughts churning in his mind.

The police would question him - and question Pazzi, requisition copies of Tig's memory and Hannibal's. Possibly Hannibal himself, though he hopes not. How much was about to come dramatically to light? What would the results be?

Mason Verger had been arrested and BR collected from the scene. Matthew Brown was dead. Was that really enough to cripple *Destabilize*? At least, Will hopes, it's enough to stop this

particular subset of activity. Four units and a partial were accounted for - destroyed or collected or now in Will's care.

Will heaves a deep sigh and tosses over, truly tired but unable to sleep. Hannibal moves slowly then, and reaches out - not so asleep that all of his sensors were inactive. He offers one hand, perfect and unscarred and open, and Will takes hold of it.

"Go to sleep," Hannibal says.

"Will you be here when I wake up?"

A slow, soft, sad smile on Hannibal's features growing in perfect approximation of a complex human emotion.

"I won't leave you like I did before," Hannibal promises. "Go to sleep."

Will curls their fingers together and finds that his mind is at last quiet enough to obey.

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Chapter 34

When Pazzi wakes up, Tigranes tells him he can have all the eggs he wants, and Will is briefly fascinated by the intensity and illogical genuineness of the emotion of relief. Too, he shares the sentiment, settling in comfortably on his other side until the periods of briefly waking and forgetting - after effects of sedation and surgery and perfectly normal - begin to fade.

No two hours after the doctors report - to a very relieved audience - that Pazzi should make a full recovery, another investigator arrives for a debrief. Tigranes is dismissed too, and leaves the private recovery room stiffly. Irritated, Will thinks, and worried. He suspects it’s only politeness that's kept internal affairs from hovering bedside - and perhaps a strict hospital visiting policy. Honestly, Will doesn't quite know - aside from whatever anxious quality he has been projecting - how *he* has been allowed to stay.

"Does he have any other family we should tell?" Will asks, hoping to distract Tigranes from too much concern.

Tigranes shakes his head, mutely.

Will waits with him, and with the much restored Hannibal. He has endured the thorough investigation for evidence that they have performed with only curiosity and a sort of uncertain helpfulness. There was nothing in his behavior priorital structure to cover these situations - no prior experience with backups being made of his memories.

Will's anxiety over what they will discover in the depths of Hannibal's memory is very small - not so large as his concern over how little he might actually remember. There seemed to be more intuition than recall left, a sound structure over hollow spaces where memories should be. Perhaps that is how it has always been, and now it is only clear because because of the completeness and acuity of Tigranes' memory.

Individualism.

He tries to rationalize this to himself - how could he feel that Tigranes was clearly separate despite looking identical, while telling himself that the Hannibal he has recovered is the same.

"Tigranes," he begins. Dark brown eyes look at him with attentive humanity, from behind the unsettled fringe of his bangs. "Do you think I'm being foolish?"

Tigranes has the mastery of silence that Hannibal never had. Without any hint of impatience, he waits for Will to clarify - to actually ask his question. Will glances across the room at Hannibal, where he sits attached to a device creating a copy of all his visual and auditory memory.

Will tries to make the question line up in his mind, but he cannot phrase it in any way that does not sound hopeless.

"He'll never be me," Tigranes says, gently, making an intuitive leap. "And, to an extent, you have to decide how much like me he could become without losing himself - the parts of him he still has."

Will thinks of the call he'd gotten from Chilton, of how simple it had been. Did he have the right to refuse Hannibal upgrades out of the fear he would change so much to become unrecognizable, or to go ahead and reach for the true understanding that Tig seemed to have? To rush Hannibal toward it in eagerness for him to experience the vibrancy life Tigranes seems to?

"Shouldn't that be his decision?" Will asks, and then before Tig can answer. "Do you think he's really the same?"

"Parts of him are," Tig assures him. His broad, firm palm settles onto Will's shoulders and the weight seems to add nothing to what's already there. He rubs a small circle. "I can't tell you what the right answer is, Will. I can offer only a weak suggestion - if Rinaldo had woken up and forgotten anything, if he would never remember the past, I'd come back tomorrow."

Tigranes hesitates, then offers a one-beat chuckle, a warm sound. "I could give him the same ties again. I miss the way he'd look the first few times, frozen between disgust and delight."

His hand makes another circle on Will's back, and he leans - very carefully - shoulder to shoulder in conspiracy. "I'm not sure if those equate, but whatever he was afterward, I'm so grateful to, and so in love with who he *is*, that I owe whatever unfolds at least my best shot."

He pauses while Will tries to digest such simple and human terms as applied to an android - equating the change to an injury rather than a resurrection like Frankenstein's monster.

"I think this is like that, with Hannibal," Tig continues gently.

Will thinks he agrees. He looks across the waiting room at the android, and then laughs a little - he was asking Tigranes for inside input, and has no idea what he can expect in the future. WIll is expecting - and here he thinks he is most wrong - a fundamental difference between consciousnesses that manifests in a larger way. He is fighting against the evidence in his mind that their intelligence and humanity presents in a way no more unique than it could between individuals of the human race.

Their experiences were different: the humanity that results is different and changeable.

"Thank you," Will says.

Tig nods and retrieves his hand from Will's back and they both watch the doorway from which the police will emerge when they have finished with Pazzi. They are both quiet.

There are decisions coming, changes and consideration that should make Will anxious, that he should be thinking about now, but instead he drifts. In this strange dream of reality, Lazarus has returned to him confused, but returned he has. Somehow, this momentous thing was now uncontested. No one was trying to claim Hannibal back or take him away. If it does not suddenly strike them that they *should*, Will is grateful.

How much of it was the natural invisibility of an attended android - thus rendering it into a possession, not an individual? Firmly claimed - as one would not attempt to confiscate a Glass - at least without due process.

"Will Graham?" The voice isn't totally familiar, but feminine and authoritative enough to lift his eyes and make him ready to move.

A uniformed officer stands in the doorway looking into the waiting room without intruding all the way in the space. She's looking at Will, eyes attentive, looking for signs of *something*. It's the officer who had come to fetch him from behind the police tape, Starling, confirmed by the name on her uniform lapel.

Her eyes zero in on his confusion and gain the quickest, most efficient target lock Will has ever seen.

"I need to ask you a few questions, if you're ready."

Will isn't sure he is, or is truly meant to be. She wants to make sure he can't corroborate his story with Pazzi's - though surely they'll pull the digital audio/video recording from Tigranes' memory banks, it left a gap - in time and reasoning. Will can't exactly lie - they have Verger in custody. It is something of a relief.

"Sure," Will says, getting up. He pats Tig once, and then follows her from the room.

"Mr Graham," she says, after he agrees to be recorded and is given the usual assurance - he isn't being charged at this time with a crime, his testimony might be used in a court of law, he has a right not to make a statement or to make a statement only with a lawyer present. "We'd like to hear your version of events just to verify the stories from several other sources."

WIll does his best to give her a coherent statement, starting from several weeks back when Verger had first contacted him through Bev. He leaves out - instinctively - anything to do with the bomb. She doesn't ask him about it, either. Pazzi has never voiced more than a suspicion and Will knows better than to admit that the detective even had that -for both their sakes.

She takes notes, takes his contact info, and gives him a sceptical eye when he admits he had gone along in the car without a struggle after Matthew had thrown his phone into the bushes.

"I wasn't thinking," he admits, and Officer Starling's frank expression reveals that she agrees.

"Well, we've seen people do stranger things," she allows - Will thinks it is her best effort at the sort of police bedside manner they called building rapport. "If you think of anything else that might to contribute to our investigation, contact me. I don't think it's a good idea for you to discuss this case with Detective Pazzi anymore. When it goes to court you can expect to be called as state's witness."

She delivers the missive in a practiced cadence that suggests many repetitions over her career, a scheduled and accepted conversational end that she gives while looking Will dead in the forehead. She is certain he understands that way, and the old well-hidden drawl of the not

quite southern states - not the drag of Georgia or the Carolinas but someplace else - appears when she asks, "Did you have any questions?"

Will has many. He settles on two for Officer Starling in particular. "Is Detective Pazzi in trouble?"

Her eyebrows arch slowly toward her hairline at the honest concern, and her cheeks color a little. *She knows.*

"Mr. Mason Verger has presented - mostly unasked for - video evidence that his lawyer will use in order to try and prove a lack of objectivity..." she hesitates, and humanity comes through her officer's uniform. Compassion. "Very likely he'll lose his job, but they'll do what they can to take care of him. It'll be spun, unless there's more to the story I don't know, as early retirement. It'll be gentle. That's my best guess."

In this case, the gentleness with which the axe fell is unlikely to matter. Will accepts the answer - he can't affect the outcome, but he can be ready for it. Next question.

"Will Hannibal be confiscated?"

"Mr Graham, I am not able to make any official statement on that, but the consensus seems to be that it won't be necessary at this juncture," she says, one long sentence in a single breath. She seems almost about to continue - maybe to speculate in a familiar manner, but she stops instead.

"Thank you, that's all I had," Will says. "Can I go and see Detective Pazzi?"

"Sure, if they're done."

They aren't, but at the least it stays quiet. No yelling erupts, though when the two suited detectives exit, they're wearing dour and thoughtful expressions. Will creeps in after, Tig right behind him.

Pazzi looks tired, distant. The harness of the oxygen mask has been removed from his face, but the rest - IV's in either arm, thickly layered bandages, a tube run up his nose and down his throat remain. It alters his voice when he speaks.

"They're fast," he observes, with some sour amusement. He swings his dark eyes around and up toward Will, apologetic - as if somehow the entire thing is *his* fault instead of more squarely resting on Will's shoulders. "They know."

"Yes," Will agrees, and rolls his shoulders a little. "Does that mean you regret it?"

Pazzi starts to laugh, after a moment of disbelief - stops suddenly with his hands over his stitches and shakes his head. "I don't see how I could."

"Then everything will be okay," Will says, with as much conviction as he can gather up.

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Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You know," Pazzi says, standing in the privacy of the elevator with Will, a heavy box of tools in his hands. "We could let Tigranes and Hannibal take care of all the heavy lifting."

Will laughs, glad to trade conspiring smiles with Pazzi. It took some of the uncertainty out of all the change. "*They* have to take the stairs. It would take twice as long."

"A little extra time to ourselves," Pazzi suggests. "They wouldn't mind."

Will slides a tempted glance in his direction. The months have done them both good; Pazzi's frame is stripped lean by his recovery, Will is growing secure and comfortable in this network of support. He is enticed to suggest a final use of his bed, before it too makes its way onto the van.

"They wouldn't," Will agrees. "But we'd both feel guilty."

He'd rather their next memory - a sort of restart, if Will is honest with himself - be someplace else. He can't forget finding Napoleon watching him, or the protracted results - even now, with Mason safely in jail.

"We would," Pazzi agrees, savoring the words and idea both. Will laughs, amused.

Downstairs they both settle their boxes onto the moving van - already half filled in neat, precise order. Hannibal's doing. Out back, Will has loaded at least as much into the dumpsters, shedding old parts of his life that he won't need or that no longer fit him.

Tig and Hannibal appear, looking intently at each other with identical features; having some debate that they felt no need to voice aloud and each carrying a lions-share sized part of of the load.

"Your Glass was ringing," Hannibal tells Will, helpful. Will pats his back pocket in a moment of absence. "It was on the counter. Ms. Lounds."

"What does that vulture want?" Pazzi asks.

"Well, she can't requisition Napoleon's hard drive again, Ray," Will assures him, "so either she wants to gloat or she wants to apologize."

Pazzi does not look convinced. His expression is hard and closed, dark eyes cloudy with dislike. Will allows, in private to himself, that such a reaction seems to be the universal first step to a friendship with Freddie Lounds.

"She didn't seem apologetic on the witness stand," Pazzi grouses.

"No," Will agrees. "But it's over, the judge threw that evidence out."

"-*after* an entire panel of jurors sat through it," Pazzi interjects, but there's not any heat in it. Embarrassing as it had been, it's over. There had been a few secondary headlines, a scandal in small magnitude underneath the collapse of the Verger empire. No real harm done. It hadn't - as Will feared - driven them apart.

"Rinaldo, you just carried an entire box of my underwear down in the elevator with my ninety six year old neighbor, making small talk the whole time," Will says.

Pazzi's expression changes slowly, stretching between several states of disbelief as he tries to decide how much truth is in the statement. Will lets him guess.

"How much is still upstairs?" he asks Hannibal.

"Winston's box of toys, the contents of the refrigerator, and then just the large furniture. And Winston, of course," Hannibal recalls everything with precision.

Will takes stock of his companions. Hannibal - much restored except for a few thin, telltale seams in his neck - and Tig both look unfazed. Will easily believes they could do this all day. Tigranes, however, is looking at Pazzi with a particular brand of concern that Will has come to trust over the course of Pazzi's recovery. Tig thinks that Pazzi is pushing more than he should for a man still in physical therapy and Will defers. A glance at his watch says that it's after five anyway, and they've been at it since early that morning.

"Well, rather than try to pack everything in the fridge, Hannibal, what do you say to a challenge?" One last meal before we leave this place behind," Will suggests.

Hannibal smiles, slow. It is less perfect than Tigranes does it, but Hannibal is younger. He has come to enjoy making the best he can with whatever was on sale or available, as Will saved up for the move. It has been a tight few months, but the results were evident.

"I hope you like ketchup," Tig says, with a grin that Hannibal hasn't mastered.

"Hannibal's done better with worse," Will tells him, and sees the challenge settle in and take root.

Tigranes follows Hannibal up the stairs, just a step behind as will pulls the loading door of the moving van shut and feeds another couple of quarters into the meter.

"You're very transparent," Pazzi tells Will in the elevator.

"Well, I've been trying to keep honest," Will says, playing at straight man and innocence both.

"You know what I mean," Pazzi says. His smile, when he gives it, is genuine, round and whole and making bright of his eyes. Will likes seeing it.

He smiles back. He knows what Pazzi means. "He already said you could have a few more eggs-"

"He said," Pazzi interrupts, in a dry drawl that stresses his own accent even as he does his best to emulate Tigranes, "*as many as I want.*"

The doors open, and they find that Hannibal and Tig have beaten them inside this time, taking stock and comparing notes on the remaining contents of the fridge. Their chatter is silent, digital and wireless but almost as evident and warm in the space as if they were speaking out loud.

Pazzi pulls off the warm gray sweater he wears, loosening the Wile E. Coyote tie - exclamation points and anvils as accents to the hapless cartoon animal - and settles at the kitchen table to watch Tigranes fuss over someone else's cooking for once.

Will picks his Glass up off the counter and settles across from Pazzi, warm and happy. A thought strikes him. He leans across the table on his elbow, lowering his eyelids and trying his best to sound cavalier.

"So," Will says, "you uh, you like looney tunes?"

Pazzi laughs. "I've rediscovered my affection."

His laugh has grown more subdued, but more frequent in recent weeks. Will thinks it still reminds him of his injury.

The smells of cooking fill the kitchen and the flashing notification light on Will's Glass finally calls his attention, irresistibly. Will swipes his way into visual voice-mail to retrieve Freddie's message.

Hi Mr. Graham. Hope moving is going well just thought I'd drop a line to tell you a court date has been set for the new Android intelligence level limit regulations. I've put in for you to be called as an advocate and give professional testimony. I expect you to do a good job, because I don't want to give up my new friend early. Anyway, I'll come over to your new place with a housewarming gift and a few more details as soon as I have them. BR says hi. Don't worry about little old me, if he starts to misbehave himself, I'm absolutely fantastic at taking Androids apart. Say hi to your boyfriends for me.

"Bad news?" Pazzi asks, reading Will's expression.

"Not *bad* exactly," Will says. "But we'll probably be back in court faster than we'd like."

Pazzi's glance steals toward the androids, with Tigranes and Hannibal working somewhere between harmony and hovering over each other. His mouth firms into a dedicated line, and Will feels an answering determination in his own heart.

"Then I guess we'll go back to court," Pazzi says.

Winston appears with a proud expression and the pink squeak-toy in his mouth, dug from the bottom of his box and now held triumphantly aloft. He gives it one demonstrative squeak and then deposits it in Pazzi's lap to signify that the game is on. Hannibal remains to supervise

dinner, and the rest of the household descends - aided by the mostly empty apartment - into a game of keep away punctuated by wheezing toy-shrieks.

The dog mostly wins.

Later, when Will has locked his door for the last time, after everything is packed into the van and ready, after a long drive and a new city and a new building, just for them, Hannibal watches Will settle in.

Pazzi bought the entire building with the thought to turn part of it - the ground floor - into offices for both of them. Will had chipped in, using funds gained from repairs - and from selling Napoleon.

The new owner calls him when he's just finished making his bed and is thinking longingly of crawling into it in his new second floor apartment - vastly bigger than his last.

"Mr. Chilton," Will answers, unsurprised. "How are you?"

"Well," Chilton says sheepishly. "I need an upgrade."

Will isn't exactly surprised - he expected that maybe Chilton would at least seek out another robotic technician in order to avoid embarrassment, but Will's work speaks for itself. He carefully considers before deciding that the thought of adding sex organs to an android as creepy as Napoleon is no longer in his pay grade.

"I have a couple of recommendations," Will tells him, and in the end, he thinks they both hang up relieved.

Hannibal is looking at him as he finishes up, sitting on the edge of the bed and waiting with a question. Will sits down next to him.

"You asked once if I wanted modifications like that," Hannibal says.

"You remember that, huh?" Will has already upgraded Hannibal's memory systems into something more continuous, emulating Tig's now that he was nominally de-classified - decommissioned, officially.

"I think I do," Hannibal says, surprising Will.

"You want..." Will starts, and reaches for Hannibal's hand. "You're sure?"

Hannibal closes both of his hands over Will's, a gentle, delicate cage. He is learning, in steps and skips, that he is allowed to want without having to always justify or explain it.

"I like to be touched," he says. "You like to be touched. I want to try the rest."

Will gives his head a shake in good humor. He'd been wondering if Hannibal would ever make a decision on this, if he even thought about it. Will had suspected it would be more like Tigranes' decision, but he's relieved, doesn't mind at all that it isn't.

"All right," Will says.

They curl close. Will has arranged the new place so that Hannibal's charging cable will reach easily to the bed.

In the morning, he heads out to the docks - it's a long drive, and Bev will tease him for this purchase, but as he closes the door behind him - emblazoned *R. Pazzi & W. Graham, android investigations and repairs* - he finds he doesn't mind at all.

[End.]

Chapter End Notes

-And here we've made it to the end of the long haul. Thanks to those of you who stuck with me for 60k words and for many adventures
-Especially, thanks to those of you who were willing to embark on a new pairing with me. I hope the ending satisfies everybody.
-Thanks for reading!

End Notes

-See: The Aleph, by Jorge Lewis Borges, for the reasoning behind the title to this work. The concept of the Aleph is related to an Omega Point; both of which begin to describe the concept of the absolute apex of knowledge and consciousness.

-This work Beta'd by the amazing Quedarius(http://archiveofourown.org/users/Quedarius/pseuds/Quedarius), to whom it is also dedicated. I would not have revisited this universe without her kind & thoughtful interest in it. I hope this is a suitable thanks for all that she's done for me!

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